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EUGENE O'NEILL

The Man and His Plays

EUGENE O'NEILL

The Man and His Plays

BY

BARRETT H. CLARK

NEW YORK
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY
1929

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EUGENE O'NEILL

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

AGAIN
GRATEFULLY

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The present volume is, in considerably revised and extended form, based on the author's earlier book under the title of EUGENE O'NEILL, *which was part of the Modern American Writers Series. Some copies are still available for those who may wish to have the entire set.*

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EUGENE O'NEILL

The Man and His Plays

EUGENE O'NEILL

The Man and His Plays

HOTEL LAFAYETTE, 1926

A SHY and silent young man in a brown well-fitting homespun suit, tall, thin, a little angular, sits uneasily on a gilt chair before a closed writing-desk in a large dark room. Scene, the Hotel Lafayette, New York City. Through the heavy lace curtains is a row of neat red-brick houses across University Place. It is raining. The lank brown figure rises and with a smile offers me a place on the sofa, then crosses and perches on the edge of the wide brass bed. His face is narrow, his forehead high; the black hair is tinged with white at the temples; the eyes are clear, bright, penetrating, yet infinitely soft. The black close-trimmed moustache emphasizes the severity of the wide straight mouth.

He begins to speak—slowly, hesitating, reluctantly. He gets up and goes to the window,

crosses back, hitching up his belt on the way. Then poising himself carefully again on the edge of the bed he quickly eats his frugal luncheon. After a brief silence he begins once more to speak, and the words come more easily as though the resonance of his musical voice were marshalling the phrases and sentences and coaxing them from the depths.

He smiles; I smile. We have met before, and before that we have corresponded, but this time it is harder to begin. It seems even a little absurd, doesn't it? O'Neill is just thirty-eight, and I a year younger. I have come here ostensibly to chat with him about the theater of the past, the present, and future, but it is my real business to discuss in detail this matter of writing about him. I am uneasy and self-conscious, and so is he, I think. I've been asked to write a book about this young man, who feels he has hardly yet got into his stride. A book! Already! He wonders if it's necessary to be so darned personal about it? His life belongs to himself, doesn't it? Surely I'll have enough material if I stick to the plays, and leave the man out of the picture?

No, I can't do that. The man is a part of the whole thing.—A long pause—a wry smile.

Personal accounts have already crept into the

press stories, several lies and exaggerations; a lot of purely legendary things are going the rounds, and there will be more.

Well—

Once more the wry smile. He must face the situation. If I don't do the job, someone else will, so we had better get things right. Very well, but let's not either of us take it too seriously. If some kind of book must be written, the ground has got to be cleared. He tries to help, by giving me a straight account of some apocryphal legend, but thinks it best for me to go to other people for an outline of his life; when the MS. is ready he will look it over. He will tell me what I haven't been able to learn from anyone else. How is that? Another pause.

So that's that, and for the rest of the afternoon we talk about *Desire Under the Elms* and *The Fountain*, the Provincetown Players, plans for new plays to be written years hence; but mostly about *The Great God Brown*. I have had the MS. with me for the past week and as he takes it he asks how I like it. He stands by the window now, cigarette in hand, eyes fixed on me as though at the moment he really cared what I thought of the new play. He listens intently, a thin wave of smoke curl-

ing between his fingers.—I have said my say without interruption.

He pulls out his watch and apologizes for having to go. He musically murmurs that he's late for rehearsal. Won't I come with him to the theater? Wait a second—

Striding to the bathroom he opens the wall cabinet, carefully measures ingredients in a small cup and mixes a tumblerful of medicine. Drinking it off, he comes back to the table and stuffs a worn copy of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* into his coat pocket, and we feel our way down the side stairs and out into the street. Our taxi skids over to the Greenwich Village Theater. . . .

This happened about three years ago. The MS. of my little monograph was passed on by O'Neill (with alterations and additions), and the volume appeared in the fall of 1926.

I last saw O'Neill after his return from Bermuda with the finished MS. of *Lazarus Laughed*, an early draft of *Strange Interlude*, and a headful of ideas.

Since that day four new plays of his have been seen in our theaters and a new O'Neill is revealed to us. With the development of this new O'Neill and with the appearance of *Marco*

Millions, Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude and *Dynamo* comes the wish on my part to enlarge on my portrait of the man and extend my criticism of his work. The present volume is longer, fuller and I hope better than the first, but I want it understood that what I have written is still for the most part a tentative and modest estimate and record, not a eulogy or an epitaph. The man still refuses to stay put, and defies anything like a final analysis.

GETTING O'NEILL TO SIT FOR HIS PORTRAIT

The personality of Eugene O'Neill is quite as extraordinary, as vividly contradictory and anomalous as his work. I had intended at first to offer in a few short introductory pages a simple statement of the facts of his life, take my notes to him and have the finished product certified as historically correct.

But the subject of this study cannot be so lightly disposed of. The more I see of him and the more I bother his friends for their opinions, the more difficult does this particular job of describing the man become.

An intelligible discussion of his plays must

be based on some knowledge of their origin during the years when, however unconsciously, he was groping for a meaning in life; when, like Synge, he was seeking all that had edge, "all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy."

My earliest impression of him remains essentially what it was the first day I laid eyes on him. He is tall and slender and wiry, with long arms and strong hands. His body is lithe and would be awkward if it were not under perfect control. He is shy and diffident; he nearly always seems embarrassed; unless he is discussing what interests him, he speaks haltingly or not at all. His silences are long and eloquent. His face in repose has a chiseled but not altogether cold severity; his smile is disarmingly frank and engaging. There is something at times almost impish in his low-toned comments, which are apt to be tinged with gleeful malice that's more a form of speech than an expression of opinion. With the ordinary amenities of social intercourse he has nothing to do, yet no one would dream of calling him discourteous. What interests him and awakens his sympathy and imagination engrosses all his

attentive faculties; what does not passes by without making the least impression.

He is fundamentally a passionate observer of humanity, a man to whom life is a tragic and beautiful adventure; a theatrical craftsman of compelling power; an artist in intent even in his failures; an uncompromising idealist.

He knows the worth of what he has done, and his reticence and modesty are not the gestures of a literary poseur.

This is what he wrote in 1925 in answer to a letter of mine telling of the publisher's suggestion that I should write a book about him for the Modern American Writers' series:

"Frankly, I honestly don't believe that I deserve any book—as yet! It seems to me there is too damn much of that premature sort of thing being done in America. On the other hand, if it's got to be done—" In putting the matter before O'Neill I had already told him I agreed with his contention, and thought it foolish to get out an "official" biography; that would, indeed, be premature. He is still growing, mentally, philosophically, artistically, and I can detect in him no sign of any hardening of the creative arteries. His ambition to explore new fields and try new forms begins to take on gigantic proportions. To attempt any sum-

ming-up the man's life work is of course foolish: he has twenty or twenty-five years more ahead of him, and he is so intensely alive and restless there is no telling what he will do next nor how far he will go.

Yet it is inevitable that books will be written about him. I pointed this out in my answer, and added that I should attempt no formal study, only a biographical sketch, an account of work already accomplished; there would be no academic documentation; no attempt to "place" the subject and his work in any literary pigeonhole. I would do my best not to make him look foolish.

Before my first conference I had collected a mass of material, making detailed notes on what I had been able to get from his friends and associates and from articles and interviews published in newspapers and magazines. O'Neill went over this carefully, and pointed out that while my facts were fairly accurate, the total impression was not quite what it should be. Most of my picturesque anecdotes were apocryphal, and I had failed to present a three-dimensional likeness. Only he put it more gently.

In returning the first draft he wrote:

"It seems to repeat somehow, to need cutting—this in addition to the marks I have taken the liberty to make on it by way of suggestion and criticism. You will find a lot of these. You see, when you speak in the script of my having helped on the details of it, you make me a bit responsible, so I've waded right in, even to the extent of suggesting word changes which I thought better expressed the truth. . . . When all is said and done—and this is, naturally, no conceivable fault of yours—the result of this first part is legend. It isn't really true. It isn't I. And the truth would make such a much more interesting—and incredible!—legend. That is what makes me melancholy. But I see no hope for this except some day to shame the devil myself, if I ever can muster the requisite interest—and nerve—simultaneously! The trouble with anyone else writing even a sketch is that I don't believe there is anyone alive today [1926] who knew me intimately in more than one phase of a life that has passed through many entirely distinct periods, with complete changes of environment, associates, etc. And I myself might not be so good at writing it; for when my memory brings back this picture or episode or that one, I simply cannot recognize that person in myself nor understand him nor his acts as mine (though objectively I can), although my reason tells me he was undeniably I."

This referred just to the biographical section. As to the criticism—the greater part of the

MS.—he thought otherwise: "Not that I agree with you at all points where you take exception —or where you praise. There is plenty I would like to argue with you about. But even where I disagree most, I admire the fine—" The rest I omit. In other words, the early study which grew and spread out into the book you now hold in your hand, was "official," and while he O.K.'d the biographical facts he had nothing to do with any judgment I passed on the plays. But it must be understood that none of the material I have added relating to the past two and a half years has been passed on by him.

Later interviews and several letters helped me considerably in collecting the available facts. I got in touch with as many of O'Neill's friends as I could find, and in the course of my narrative I think I have given each of them due credit. Among those who have taken the trouble to tell me much that has never gotten into print (with much that never will) are Judge Frederick P. Latimer, former editor of the New London *Telegraph;* Charles Webster, who acted with Eugene in his father's company; Edna Kenton, associated with the Provincetown Players from their earliest days; Harry Kemp,

Edward J. Ballantine, M. Eleanor Fitzgerald, James Light, Charles O'Brien Kennedy, and Richard Madden. Frank Shay has told me wonderful tales of human interest. For various matters of fact I am indebted to Kenneth Macgowan, Alfred Kreymborg, George Jean Nathan, Professor George P. Baker, Susan Glaspell, Jasper Deeter, and Manuel Komroff. Dr. Isaac Goldberg has allowed me to use some of the O'Neill letters to George Nathan, printed in *The Theater of George Jean Nathan*, and Horace Liveright has made it possible to reprint passages from the plays. Members of the Theater Guild staff have helped me much, and Clara Weiss, formerly of the Greenwich Village Theater, has spared neither time nor patience in digging up programs, clippings and other material. Similar service has more recently been rendered by Helen Deutsch, of the Provincetown Players.

Other sources drawn upon—books and articles and programs—are listed at the end of this volume. For the critical opinions I alone am of course answerable.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Early in 1919 O'Neill sent me a short autobiography for use in an article of mine, which appeared in the New York *Sun* (May 18), the first, I think, that dealt generally with the man's achievements as a writer. He said:

"Your letter is encouragement of a deeply appreciated kind, and I am sincerely grateful for the renewed confidence with which it heartens me. Your sympathetic interest could not fail to inspire me with respect, for I have made your books my own . . . and I unreservedly recognize the genuine authority of your criticism.

"As for data relative to myself, it is a privilege to give you anything you might think of interest. I am inexperienced in this matter, however, and you must pardon me if what I am sending proves unsuitable. But it seems to me that a bare outline of my experiences preceding any attempt—or, in truth, desire—to write might be interesting as revealing the background of real life behind my work, and as proving that I have not written out of the top of my head.

"I am thirty. My undergraduate college education was confined to a freshman year at Princeton University, class of 1910. My first job was secretary of a mail-order firm in New York. In 1909 I went with a mining engineer on a gold prospecting trip to Spanish Honduras, Central

America. At the end of six months I was invalided home—tropical malarial fever—no gold. After that I became assistant manager of a theatrical company touring the East and Middle West. My first voyage to sea followed: sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque, Boston to Buenos Aires. In Argentine I worked at various occupations—in the draughting department of the Westinghouse Electrical Company, in the wool house of a packing plant at La Plata, in the office of the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Buenos Aires. Followed another voyage at sea, tending mules in a cattle steamer, Buenos Aires to Durban, [South] Africa, and return. After that a lengthy period of complete destitution in Buenos Aires—'on the beach'—terminated by my signing on as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York. My final experience at sea followed soon after this—able seaman on the American Line, New York-Southampton. The next winter I played a part in my father's vaudeville version of Monte Cristo, touring the Far West. Then I worked as reporter on the New London, Connecticut, *Telegraph*. My health broke down, my lungs being affected, and I spent six months in a sanatorium thinking it over. It was in this enforced period of reflection that the urge to write first came to me. The next fall—I was twenty-four—I began my first play—'The Web.' In 1914-1915 I was a student in Professor Baker's English 47 at Harvard. The summer of 1916 I spent at Provincetown. It was during that summer the Provincetown Players, who have made the orig-

inal productions of nearly all my short plays in New York, were first organized. Is there anything in the above disconnected experiences which is of any service? I surely hope so."

A few days after this came O'Neill wrote again saying: "I'm glad the stuff I sent you will fill the bill. I was rather afraid it looked as if I were making a Jack London hero of myself—whereas . . . I cannot recollect one heroic passage in those experiences!"

The outline is fairly accurate so far as it goes, but to begin at the beginning—

HE IS BORN

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born October 16, 1888, in a room on the third floor of the Barrett House, then an uptown family hotel, now the Hotel Cadillac, on Broadway at 43rd Street, New York. He is the son of James O'Neill and Ella Quinlan, both of them devout Catholics. His father was one of the most gifted American actors, a favorite from coast to coast, and his mother a quiet woman of whom we hear little, and whose influence over the boy can only be surmised. George Jean Nathan tells me that his own mother went

to the same convent in Cleveland with Ella Quinlan, of whom she used to relate that the girl was strikingly beautiful and that she was looked up to by students and teachers alike as the most pious girl in the place. In marrying an actor she had been forced to give up family and friends. "My mother," O'Neill tells me, "was a fine pianist—exceptionally fine, I believe. I like good music, and always have, since my earliest childhood." James O'Neill was tall and handsome, one of the most impressive personalities in the theater of his generation. Booth had once said of him that he could play Othello better than himself, and at one time O'Neill alternated with him. "My father," says the younger O'Neill, "was really a remarkable actor, but the enormous success of *Monte Cristo* kept him from doing other things. He could go out year after year and clear fifty thousand in a season. He thought then he simply couldn't afford to do anything else. But in his later years he was full of bitter regrets. He felt *Monte Cristo* had ruined his career as an artist."

To determine the influence of James O'Neill, Mrs. O'Neill and their eldest son on Eugene will be the task of some future biographer. They were a remarkable family. In his *Six-*

teen Authors to One David Karsner speaks with evident authority of two persons who must have made a lasting impression on the boy Eugene. His brother Jim was a "waggish fellow, and when Eugene was old enough the brother began to teach him all that he knew of worldliness. This continued until Eugene was quite well into youthhood, but he soon learned to unlearn and discount his brother's tutelage." Then there was a Scotch nurse who until the child was seven used to tell him horrible tales, and regale him with "sordid episodes, from the latest murder to the farthest terror that her whimsy could contrive." O'Neill informed his interviewer, however, that the nurse was not unkind or cruel.

"My first seven years," writes O'Neill in a letter to Prof. Arthur Hobson Quinn, "were spent mainly in the larger towns all over the United States—my mother accompanying my father on his road tours in *Monte Cristo* and repertoire, although she was never an actress and had rather an aversion for the . . . stage in general." During the next six years he attended Catholic and non-sectarian boarding schools and in 1902 was sent to Betts Academy at Stamford. The autumn after his graduation in 1906 he matriculated at Princeton, where he

stayed until the following June. Before the final examination he was suspended because of "general hell-raising"; specifically, it is said, for throwing a beer bottle through a window of President Wilson's house. Yet the incident was not so serious as to prevent his returning, if he liked, after the expiration of one year. But college no longer interested him. He then took a job as secretary of a New York mail-order business in which his father had an interest. The firm sold "10-cent jewelry . . . giving an alleged phonograph with one record as a premium to children and seminary girls who disposed of the shabby baubles." His duties consisted mostly in attending to the correspondence, but I understand that the greater part of his work was done by a subordinate. O'Neill admits that he never took his job seriously and when the firm went out of business the youth turned his back on the office with a sigh of relief.

In 1909 he married Kathleen Jenkins of New York, and the following year a son was born. Eugene Junior is now a Freshman at Yale. A glance at our record of O'Neill's wanderings will show that the married life of the young couple lasted only a short time. The marriage, characterized laconically as "a mis-

take," was formally ended by a divorce in 1912.

Late in 1909 he set out on his gold-prospecting trip to Honduras. Though he is careful to minimize the importance and almost deny the presence of any romantic glamor in this and later exploits, there is no doubt that he was impressed by the exotic scenes and people that formed the background of all his years of wandering. His favorite writers of fiction were Jack London and Conrad and Kipling, and in later years he read Marx and Kropotkin and Nietzsche. His first printed writings—as we shall see—were inspired largely by Kipling and London and Conrad.

When he returned home in 1910 his father was playing with Viola Allen in *The White Sister*, and Eugene was made assistant manager of the Company. He toured with it from St. Louis to Boston for three months, was not especially interested in what he was doing, and soon after the end of the season he embarked on his first sea voyage.

THE FIRST VOYAGE

This voyage of "sixty-five days on a Norwegian barque" took him to Buenos Aires. He

worked first for the Westinghouse Company, then for Swift at La Plata, and finally for the Singer Company in Buenos Aires again. These jobs were only stop-gaps, temporary uncongenial occupations; he either walked out in disgust or was discharged in turn from each of them. "I landed in Buenos Aires," he said, "a gentleman so-called, and wound up a bum on the docks in fact." He preferred hanging about the waterfront, making friends with sailors, stevedores, the down-and-outs. And he liked to drink. His bumming instincts, however pronounced, were not altogether vicious; he was not a hopeless failure. He had simply not found himself. Probably he was not yet even looking for himself. On the other hand, he was no literary chap in search of copy. He bunked with the outcasts because he was himself something of an outcast; he worked when he had to—when he could find work—in order to pay for board, room and liquor, and on occasion for such crude forms of entertainment as he could find near the wharves or in the vicinity of Buenos Aires.

In the evenings he used sometimes to go to the Sailor's Opera, "a large café to which all seamen automatically went. There the seaman yarned of adventures in strange seas, boasted of

his exploits to officially pretty ladies, drank, played cards, fought and wallowed.

"'It sure was a madhouse,'[1] said O'Neill.* 'But somehow a regular program was in progress. Everyone present was expected to contribute something. If your voice cracked, your head usually did, too. Some old sailor might get up and unroll a yarn, another might do a dance, or there would be a heated discussion between say Yankee and British sailors as to the respective prowess of their ships. And, if nothing else promised, "a bit of a harmless fight" usually could be depended upon as the inevitable star feature to round out the evening's entertainment.'"

So much of what he saw and heard and did has gone into the making of the sea-plays that some reference should also be made to the motion pictures at Barracas, a suburb of Buenos Aires.

"'These moving pictures,' said O'Neill, 'were mighty rough stuff. Nothing was left to the imagination. Every form of perversity was enacted, and of course sailors flocked to them. But, save for the usual exceptions, they were not vicious men. They were in the main hon-

* See page 198 for particular references to sources of all quotations in this volume not referred to in the text.

est, good-natured, unheroically courageous men trying to pass the time pleasantly.' "

Before long he went to sea again "tending mules on a cattle steamer, Buenos Aires to Durban, [South] Africa, and return." As he had no cash, he was not allowed to remain there or even to land. On his return to Buenos Aires there followed the "lengthy period of complete destitution . . . 'on the beach'—terminated by my signing as ordinary seaman on a British tramp steamer bound home for New York." This brings us down to the year 1911.

JIMMY THE PRIEST'S

" 'In New York,' he says, 'I lived at "Jimmy the Priest's," a waterfront dive, with a back room where you could sleep with your head on the table if you bought a schooner of beer.

" 'Jimmy the Priest's' was the original for 'Johnny the Priest's,' which is the saloon setting for the first act of *Anna Christie*. It was so named because 'Jimmy,' the proprietor, with his pale, thin, clean-shaven face, mild blue eyes and white hair seemed to be more suited for a cassock than the bartender's apron he wore. . . . 'Jimmy the Priest's' certainly was a hell-

hole. . . . It was awful. The house was almost coming down and the principal housewreckers were vermin. I was absolutely down, financially, those days, and you can get an idea of the kind of room I had when I tell you that the rent was three dollars a month. One roommate of mine jumped out of the window.[2]

"Again I hung around the waterfront for a while. There, as at Buenos Aires, I picked up an occasional job"—on a mail boat. After a few weeks, or months, "I shipped on the American liner *New York*, as an able seaman. I made the voyage to Southampton . . . and came back on the *Philadelphia*."

One day, some time after his last voyage, he happened to win at gambling what was to him a fairly large sum of money. Of course, that meant a wild party. How long afterward he couldn't tell me, but probably a day or two, when O'Neill regained consciousness he found himself on a through train with a ticket for New Orleans. Why New Orleans? No one knows.

BARNSTORMING

On his arrival he fortunately discovered that his father was playing the ever-popular *Monte*

Cristo. The prodigal presented himself to his perplexed parent and appealed for money enough to buy a return ticket. The elder O'Neill was used to this kind of appeal. The story is told that once Eugene and his elder brother Jim waited for Monte Cristo at the stage door after a matinée performance. Instead of asking point-blank for a gift they artfully reminded the actor of the big scene where he had slapped his pockets and exultantly proclaimed that he had millions to conquer the world with. Couldn't he loosen up and give them a dollar?

I leave the story, because O'Neill admits it is characteristic—but it isn't true.

In New Orleans no fatted calf was served up and Eugene was offered the choice of making his way back north by his own devices or joining the troupe as an actor. New York is a long way from New Orleans, so Eugene's name was added to the payroll of the *Monte Cristo* Company. He learned his small part on the train and appeared for the first time as an actor in Ogden, Utah. Charles Webster, who was in the company at the time, says that O'Neill played the unimportant rôle of a jailer. Mr. Webster was amused by Eugene's apparent astonishment at his—Webster's—ability to play

three different parts in the same show. Sometimes when the elder O'Neill complained of his acting Eugene would gravely protest, declaring sarcastically it was a wonder that in such a show anyone could do anything at all and get away with it.

The company toured the Orpheum circuit in the cities of the Far West and at the close of the season, fifteen weeks later, the O'Neills returned to their summer home in New London.

HE BECOMES A REPORTER

There in August O'Neill began work as a cub reporter on the *Telegraph*. He did regular reporting and contributed verse to a "colyum" about twice a week for nearly six months. It has been said that his half year as a newspaper-man was a period of unhappiness and depression, but he assures me that he was usually happy, interested in his work, and fortunate in most of his personal associations. His friendship with the boss, Frederick P. Latimer, who liked and believed in him, meant a great deal in those days. "He's the first one," O'Neill says, "who really thought I had something to say, and believed I could say it."

"As we used to talk together," the Judge told me when I went up to New London to see him, "and argue our different philosophies, I thought he was the most stubborn and irreconcilable social rebel I had ever met. We appreciated each other's sympathies, but to each, in the moralities and religious thought and political notions, the other was 'all wet.'

"He was the cub reporter," he went on, "and the four things about him that impressed me at once were his modesty, his native gentlemanliness, his wonderful eyes, and his literary style. It was evident at once that this was no ordinary boy, and I watched what he thought and wrote and did with extreme interest. From flashes in the quality of the stuff he gave the paper, and the poems and play-manuscripts he showed me, I was so struck that I told his father Eugene did not have merely talent, but a very high order of genius. I believe I am the first who ever made that prediction. My notion at the time was that he would eventually abandon the poetic medium and become a novelist. While I've not been surprised at his success as a dramatist, I still cling to my original opinion."

But what was O'Neill like in the New London days, I wondered?

"His health was precarious," the Judge an-

swered, "so much so that he had to quit work and betake himself to the out-of-doors, where I was often with him, especially on the water. He's always been fond of that. He was at one time in love with a very sweet young lady quite opposed to his radical ways of looking at things, and they were in the throes of breaking apart. He was adrift in mind and spirit, and the body was threatened. I was sorry for him, and sorry again because a good many of his local acquaintances were of a mildly Bohemian sort. . . . There was something in Eugene at that time—an innate nobility which inspires and drives a man against whatever hindrance to be himself, however Heaven or Hell conspires to rob him of that birthright.

"Emphatically he was 'different.' I thought it astonishing how keen was his wit, what a complete iconoclast he was, how richly he sympathized with the victims of man-made distress, how his imagination was running high as the festering skies above Ye Ancient Mariner; his descriptions strong and his spirit hot to produce something worth while for the sake of its own value and in utter scorn of its commercial value or conventional fame.

"I wouldn't," he concluded, "call Eugene a misanthrope by any means, even if he certainly

is no Will Rogers. If he could only be in one of two places in a town—the church or the jail —I know where I would find him!"

ILLNESS

In December, 1912, O'Neill's health broke down. Up to that time his existence had been in the most literal sense irregular: he had spent little time at home and for sixteen years he had been either at school, traveling with his parents, venturing forth on the high seas or drifting from job to job in North or South America; his nervous system, never too strong, had been seriously taxed by a good deal of hard and indiscriminate drinking. It had not occurred to him that it might be necessary to think of his health.

Now out of a clear sky the doctor told him he had a touch of tuberculosis, and for the first time he would have to take hold of himself. He was ordered to a sanatorium, and on Christmas Eve he entered Gaylord Farm at Wallingford, Connecticut. What he felt on entering the place may be inferred from a glance at the opening pages of *The Straw*.

During the winter and spring of 1912-13 he

began, as he says, "thinking it over." At Gaylord the urge to write first came to him, the desire to express what he knew and felt about life in the form of drama.

He had dabbled in verse, and during his six months on the *Telegraph* he had learned how to tell a "story." But such writing as he had done was what nearly all young men turn out before they begin to grow up. Until the time of his breakdown he "never had any definite idea" what he wanted to do. "My father," he says, "was worried about me. He didn't know how to handle me, he didn't 'get' what I was trying to do; he just wanted me to settle down and make a living. He often used to think I was just crazy."

The five months at Gaylord marked a turning-point in his life.

> ". . . It was at Gaylord that my mind got the chance to establish itself, to digest and evaluate the impressions of many past years in which one experience had crowded on another with never a second's reflection. At Gaylord I really thought about my life for the first time, about past and future. Undoubtedly the inactivity forced upon me by the life at a san forced me to mental activity, especially as I had always been high-strung and nervous temperamentally." [8]

DISCHARGED AS ARRESTED

He was "discharged as arrested," diagnosed as an uninteresting case, "there was so little wrong with him." In the late spring he spent some time with his family in New London, and when his father's season opened he went to live with the Rippins, an English family who had a home overlooking Long Island Sound. Here he stayed for over a year, reading, resting, exercising—and writing. The doctor's warning had sunk deep into his consciousness, and he set to work building up his health. "I went swimming in the Sound," he told me, "every day during the winter."

On the authority of one member of the Rippin family who was present at the time I must add that it was sometimes necessary to rout the young man out of a warm bed and make him hop into his bathing suit on pain of missing breakfast. O'Neill himself has not been formally charged with the crime of oversleeping, so I leave the statement as it is.

In fifteen or sixteen months' time he wrote eleven one-acters, two long plays, and some verse. The new life agreed with him. "After I left the san," he says, "I kept up the sleeping

College Library

outdoors for over a year and kept pretty careful watch over myself generally. In fact, with more or less frequent lapses due to rehearsals in New York, etc., I've lived a pretty healthy outdoor life ever since. It's easy, for I much prefer it to city life anyway."

THE TURNING POINT

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of O'Neill's breakdown in the winter of 1912-13. The youth who entered Gaylord and the man who left it were two different beings. The first was a wild boy who loved life in the raw, whose restlessness and curiosity drove him away from family and friends in search of strange countries and still stranger men. He drank when he had the money, though that was not so very often. In the course of his wanderings he came to know something of men, not their hypocritical manners and the masks they wear, but their minds and hearts, their ways of speaking and behaving. He was not an intruder in the underworld, but a part of it. Like Gorky he seems to have found in the lot of the outcast some consoling reality, some satisfactory reading of life.

I am told by Harry Kemp that once a feeble-minded boy of six formed a deep affection for him, and it seems that O'Neill took pains to be kind. There was something strangely tender in the boy's longing to know things, and in the man's efforts to explain. One day the two were sitting on the wide yellow beach at Provincetown, looking out over the Atlantic. The boy wondered what was beyond Europe? "The horizon," answered O'Neill. "But what," persisted the lad, "is beyond the horizon?"

I don't mean to read a strange significance into the episode, but I think I may legitimately claim that in the unsocial misfits of our world the young O'Neill found something that he needed, something that was not to be found in normal ladies and gentlemen.

The drinking exploits of the early days were spectacular, and that is surely the reason for the more spectacular tales that have been repeated about them. I have no wish to pass over or minimize the importance of this, and O'Neill himself doesn't want to be whitewashed. But it stands to reason that no one could do as much work as he has done during the past fourteen years without the most rigid kind of self-discipline. He is continually solicitous about his health, for without that work is impossible, and

work with him comes first. Exercise is a fetish. "I wanted," he tells me, "to be a two-fisted Jack London 'he-man' sailor, to knock 'em cold and eat 'em alive." Here speaks the youth whose delicate health and limited strength kept him from going as far as the other fellow.

"At Provincetown," says Harry Kemp, "he used to lie on the beach for hours in his bathing-suit—when he was not working. He's one of the finest swimmers I've ever seen; he can do the Crawl as if he'd been born to it. He often used to go way out to the Point. Agnes [Mrs. O'Neill] was worried as hell, but nothing'd stop 'Gene. And you ought to have seen him in his Eskimo kayak! He'd get thinking out some idea, and round the Point in the roughest weather."

Plenty of exercise and hard work has been the rule since 1913. Kemp remembers how in the coldest days, in his old shack at Provincetown for the first year or two, O'Neill would wrap himself up in a blanket, stick an oil-burner under him, and write hour after hour. Though he was on friendly terms with other writers, he would hang the "Go to Hell" sign on his door when he was busy. He knew what he wanted, and he usually got it.

On leaving the sanatorium, he had made up

his mind that he wanted to write plays. He had once thought he could write poetry: Judge Latimer told me Eugene didn't like it when he was told that his forte was prose, but O'Neill says that what he wrote for the paper was hardly ever serious verse. He was a reporter who contributed jingles to a "colyum"; that was part of his job. "You mustn't," he told me with a touch of impatience, "take seriously the stuff I wrote for the *Telegraph*. If I'd thought you were going to look up everything in the old files, I wouldn't have told you about it." He has, however, written a good deal in verse form that means something to him. He has a large notebook full of verses accumulated during more than fifteen years. He will not publish it. Alfred Kreymborg tells me he saw several of the poems when he was running *Broom*. The serious pieces "had fine stuff in them." But not quite what Kreymborg wanted. I wonder if he sent O'Neill a regular rejection slip? A. K. says the contributions weren't quite striking enough.

The truth is that O'Neill was not cut out for a literary career; he has never been a "literary" man. The pursuit of the *mot juste* has been of little importance to him compared with the search for life and the quest for an explanation

of it. When he began work as a dramatist he was a young man with an insatiable zest for living. He had come to grips with existence, and the moment he reached the saturation point and taken in all he could assimilate, he had to express it. It must be remembered that the plays always came after and grew out of his experience. He was and has always been a seeker of what lies beyond the horizon, of the elusive forms of beauty that float in the imagination of the poet.

When he began in earnest his equipment was a clear mind, an innate sense of the theater, a sensitive and powerful imagination, and a fund of human experience—of a kind. He had read much, but not from a five-foot shelf; not for cultural purposes or self-improvement, but for spiritual sustenance. He was familiar with Nietzsche in translation before he went to Harvard, and there, with the help of a German grammar and dictionary, he read the whole of *Zarathustra* in the original, in order to get a sufficient working knowledge of German to read the plays of Wedekind, few of which were then available in English.

By the time he was ready to write he knew a good deal about the show business, he had had experience with his father's company, but what

he knew of the old-school drama served only to intensify his dislike of its routine tricks.

His own earliest attempts show evidence of revolt against the form and content of the American drama of the past, yet he knew that drama fairly well. And besides, he was well up on recent drama. Even during his years of adventure and aimless wandering, he went often to the theater. As a son of James O'Neill he could get free seats at almost any box-office. He was especially impressed by Nazimova's first productions of Ibsen. He was also a voracious reader of plays. During his stay at the Rippins' he read nearly all the time when he was not exercising or writing.

"I read about everything I could lay hands on: the Greeks, the Elizabethans—practically all the classics—and of course all the moderns. Ibsen and Strindberg, especially Strindberg."

HE GOES TO HARVARD

His year and more of 'prentice work had shown him that he had need of certain technical advice. What about Baker's "47" playwriting class at Harvard? He might take the course? It could do no harm. So at the suggestion of

his friend Clayton Hamilton, Eugene went to Cambridge in the fall of 1914. There he wrote two plays, *The Personal Equation*, in four acts (at one time called *The Second Engineer*), and a one-acter called *The Dear Doctor*.

A fellow-student records in a letter to me these impressions of O'Neill when he was at Cambridge:

> "My own memory of O'Neill is that he was good-looking, very nervous, extremely impatient with 47, and anxious to get down to live in Greenwich Village. /I happen to remember two things he wrote: a one-act farce . . . which he called *The Dear Doctor*, and a long play about sea life called *The Second Engineer*. The first was inconspicuous (I don't know why the title sticks with me) and the latter was labored and stiff. His worst fault, I think, was an ineptitude at dialogue, except when the speakers were raving, drunk, or profane. He was friendly, though rather uneasy and inarticulate at times. You got the impression that he trembled a little, and seemed trying to keep from stuttering. But when he delivered himself of a remark, it was impressive . . . I always thought him very likeable."

My correspondent adds that he was "foul-mouthed," and when I told this to O'Neill he smiled gleefully. "Foul-mouthed"—oh, no. The man who wrote the letter was a fastidious

youth who looked as though he could be easily shocked, and it was for this reason that O'Neill would occasionally go out of his way to blaspheme after the fashion of sailors. He only did it to annoy!

Another classmate laconically states that the dark-eyed Irishman was a "sarcastic bastard."

A picturesque account of the Cambridge days was recently published by another classmate, John V. A. Weaver, under the title *I Knew Him When*—, in the New York *Sunday World*.[4] Though Mr. Weaver waxes bitter at the end of his glowing story, and thinks 'Gene has become high-hat, what he writes is vivid and characteristic, if not meticulously exact in the details. Here are a couple of paragraphs:

> "Going out of the class-room Elkins (the Society man) and myself moved on O'Neill. His diffidence seemed to have gone. We repaired to one of the Shamrock bars. . . . We drank ale. We continued drinking ale until four in the morning, feet on the rail, one hand in the free lunch. It was just one of those nights. Ribald tales, anecdotes of experience, theorizing about the drama—what the collegians used to call a 'bull session.' A bull session de luxe. We piled finally into a decrepit hack. We fell into O'Neill's room some time about five. I had just purchased that day a copy of 'Spoon River Anthology.' When

the dawn broke, I was sitting on a trunk, Elkins sprawled across the bed, O'Neill reading in his powerful, melancholy bass, poem after poem from that disturbing collection. . . .

"Women were forever calling for 'Gene. There was something apparently irresistible in his strange combination of cruelty (around the mouth), intelligence (in his eyes), and sympathy (in his voice). I would not say that he was 'good-looking.' But one girl told me she could not get his face out of her thoughts. He was hard-boiled and whimsical. He was brutal and tender, so I was told. From shop girl to 'sassiety' queen, they all seemed to develop certain tendencies in his presence. What may have resulted, deponent sayeth not. About some things 'Gene was Sphinx-like. All I can report is the phenomena."

This article has been quoted widely and the subject of it has made no public comment, but it is only just to say that O'Neill denies not so much the general spirit but the historical accuracy of the episode.

What did O'Neill get out of his course in playwriting?

"Well," he tells me, "not much out of the actual class-work itself. Necessarily, most of what Baker had to teach the beginners about the theater as a physical medium was old stuff to me. Though on one occasion Baker told me he didn't think *Bound East for Cardiff* (written

before I entered the class) was a play at all, I respected his judgment. The plays I wrote for him were rotten. The long one was a rambling thing about a seamen's and firemen's strike. But it's rather funny about the one-acter. We thought it was slick enough for vaudeville, but when I began to see about the rights I found the story I'd based it on was stolen from a successful vaudeville sketch!—Yes, I did get a great deal from Baker—personally. He encouraged me, made me feel it was worth while going ahead. My personal association with him meant the devil of a lot to me at that time."

Professor Baker's own words, written in a letter to me (January, 1926) are worth quoting:

> "When O'Neill was working with me, he showed by the end of the year that he already knew how to write well in the one-act form, but he could not as yet manage the longer forms. I was very eager that he should return for a second year of work in these longer forms, but did not know till later that, though equally eager, his means at the moment made this impossible. O'Neill, when with me, worked steadily and with increasing effectiveness. He seemed absorbedly interested in what he was trying to do. Because of his wider experience of life, he seemed a good deal older than most of the men in the course, although not really so in years. He seemed a little aloof, though I never found him so personally. This, I think,

came quite as much from a certain awe of him in his fellow-students because of his wider experiences, as from any holding apart by him. . . . After all these years my pleasant memory of O'Neill in the work is far more vivid than the memory of the details of that work."

PROVINCETOWN

Whatever the causes that ultimately determined his course, O'Neill spent the winter of 1915-16 in and around Greenwich Village, New York, where he found congenial companions, mostly among the Radicals of the Labor movement, I. W. W.'s and the Anarchist group, and with what he calls the "true native villagers," the negro and Italian inhabitants of the quarter. It was not until he went to Provincetown that he came to know the people who founded the Players and were the pioneers in the movement: George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, Frank Shay, Frederick Burt, Mary Heaton Vorse, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Harry Kemp, E. J. Ballantine, Neith Boyce, and Hutchins Hapgood.

These young men and women, under the leadership of Cook, had played two short summer seasons of one-acters in 1915 and 1916. It

was after the second summer that the Provincetown Players were formally organized, but as such they never played in the town that gave them their name.

The Wharf Theater, owned by Mary Heaton Vorse, was used for the production of four bills of one-acters and one review bill. This was in 1916, when O'Neill's first play was acted.

In *The Road to the Temple* Susan Glaspell tells how Margaret Steele had taken the old fish-house on the wharf for a studio, but allowed Cook and his friends to use it, "so more people could come." Cook had dreamed of a theater where work done in the spirit of play should have "the only true seriousness." "Why not," he wondered, "write our own plays and put them on ourselves . . . ? A whole community working together, developing unsuspected talents." So the fish-house was made into a playhouse, and christened the Wharf Theater, with room for ninety people "if they didn't mind sitting close together on wooden benches with no backs."

"We gave a first bill," writes Miss Glaspell, "then met at our house to read plays for a second. Two Irishmen, one old and one young, had arrived and taken a shack just up the street.

'Terry,' I said to the one not young, 'haven't you a play to read to us?'

"'No,' said Terry Carlin, 'I don't write, I just think, and sometimes talk. But Mr. O'Neill has got a whole trunk full of plays,' he smiled.

"That didn't sound so promising, but I said: 'Well, tell Mr. O'Neill to come to our house at eight o'clock tonight, and bring some of his plays.'

"So 'Gene took *Bound East for Cardiff* from his trunk, and Freddie Burt read it to us, 'Gene staying out in the dining-room while the reading went on.

"He was not left alone in the dining-room when the reading had finished.

"Then we knew what we were for."

Everyone in those days was restless, ambitious, wanting to get something done, and a playhouse was one means of using up the energy of young people who were in their different ways conscious of a need for a new vision and a new power in the theater. George Cram Cook was the natural leader of such a venture.

"JIG" COOK

"Cook," O'Neill told me, "was the big man, the dominating and inspiring genius of the Players. Always enthusiastic, vital, impatient with everything that smacked of falsity or compromise, he represented the spirit of revolt against the old worn-out traditions, the commercial theater, the tawdry artificialities of the stage. I owe a tremendous lot to the Players —they encouraged me to write, and produced all my early and many of my later plays. But I can't honestly say I would not have gone on writing plays if it hadn't been for them. I had already gone too far ever to quit."

The question is not whether he would have written, but how far the Players helped him to write the sort of plays he did write. Miss Edna Kenton, who knows a lot about the matter, has given in the introductory pages of Cook's *Greek Coins* a careful statement of her opinion:

> "But there is no doubt at all that had he not had our Playwrights' Theater and our experimental stage to use always precisely as he wished to use them, he would have reached Broadway by quite another road and with quite other plays . . . he had not only our stage; he had our 'subscription

> list,' and he used its members, bill after bill, season after season, in ways they could never dream of; played with them and never need for a thought of them except as stark laboratory reactions to his own experimentations. No other American playwright has ever had such prolonged preliminary freedom with stage and audience alike."

It is equally true that if it hadn't been for the plays of O'Neill and Miss Glaspell there would not have been much reason for the continuance of the Theater—and probably few subscribers. At least at that time. But by now the Provincetown people have risen so often from their own ashes that they must now be acknowledged as the most ancient and honorable of our aiders and abetters of young and unknown Americans. It is to be remembered that O'Neill was enthusiastic about the plays of Paul Green and expressed a wish to do whatever he could to have the Players produce *In Abraham's Bosom.*

I wish I could describe as an eye-witness the early days at Provincetown. If I had gone to Peaked Hill in 1919 as I had planned I might now have described what the sleepy little fishing-town looked like before it fell into the hands of hotel-keepers and their summer guests; but I first set eyes on the place one summer morning twelve years after the time I

am writing about. A wet fog hung over harbor and town, and the big feature of the main street was a gaudy movie-house called The Provincetown Theater. This monument to local enterprise stands only a couple of minutes' walk from the old Wharf Theater. The fog lifted, and for a moment the thin spit of shining sand they call the Point shot out across a wide expanse of smoking water. Outside the town everything looks about as it must always have looked, from the day the Pilgrims first set foot on shore beyond the Wharf to that afternoon when the gaunt young Irishman brought his trunkful of plays to Terry Carlin's shack. There are the desolate sand-dunes and the light blue sea, and the gnarled and stunted shrubs that fringe the marshes and rushy hollows.

Harry Kemp and Frank Shay have reminisced for my benefit in an effort to convey some notion of the days when O'Neill and the others had not yet arrived, and no one took himself too seriously. Out of Kemp's epic effusions ("They're great to listen to," O'Neill says, "even if the details aren't always exact") I gather that the Tramp Poet wanted to buttonhole the playwright and get him to chin about books and poetry, but was never able to start a discussion. 'Gene would talk only about people

or things that interested him, or else sit staring at nothing: he didn't have a damn word to say about literature. It was not for several years that Kemp gave up the hope of being able to stretch out on top of one of the dunes and talk about Shelley to the accompaniment of the waves below. The dark Irishman remained stubbornly silent. Once, though, Kemp's hopes rose high when 'Gene, who liked to take long walks over from Peaked Hill, got into the habit of stopping at the Kemps' house with some regularity. But again no long talks, because 'Gene, after silently retiring for a few moments, guessed he'd be going on again. Then Kemp tumbled, and the next time their visitor came he got no chance to retire, and was made to drink much more tea than he wanted. No talk, no bathroom, said Kemp to himself, till at last "'Gene turned to me and confessed his back teeth were floating!" O'Neill has since admitted that the joke was on him.

Some day I hope Kemp will write out the whole story of the lonely writer O'Neill had invited to spend a few weeks with him during Mrs. O'Neill's absence. Both young men were in need of company. Kemp describes the man sitting for a couple of days face to face with his uncommunicative host, and at the end of a week

rising up in rage and despair and cursing him before going home to enjoy his own company.

I must pass on quickly, simply expressing the hope that someone will write the whole history of the Provincetown Players. Miss Glaspell's *Road to the Temple* shows how the thing could be done. The first chapter belongs in this place.

THE "THIRST" VOLUME

Among the plays O'Neill had brought to Provincetown were five that had already been published in book form. In 1914 Richard G. Badger of Boston issued in his American Dramatists' Series a thin book called *Thirst and Other One-act Plays by Eugene G. O'Neill.* The manuscript had been offered here and there, but no one would risk publishing it. Then Mr. Badger offered to do so on condition that the author should stand all the expenses. This the author couldn't do, so to James O'Neill, interpreter of the old romantic drama, we are indebted for paying the publication cost of the first plays of Eugene O'Neill, pioneer of a new American drama. The book did not sell. Clayton Hamilton says that he wrote the only review of it that ever appeared. I have not seen

his criticism, but I know what it means to be encouraged by him. The notice of his young friend's first book must have been kindly and encouraging.

O'Neill's father then sent Eugene to Harvard with the hope that he might find himself, and then he waited for something to happen. It is often said that the old gentleman was hard on the boy, objecting to Eugene's having anything to do with the theater; even that he kept him penniless and practically a prisoner in order to bring him to terms. Doubtless he was worried, but above all, as O'Neill says, he was perplexed. "He did believe in me—in a way, but as I've said, he just thought I was crazy. He didn't see why I should write the kind of plays I did, because there was no market for them, but he must have thought there was something to them. He believed I might some day amount to something—if I lived."

It is pleasant to know that the father was able to see the son's first work well received in the theater and, after the manner of fathers, to pretend he "knew the boy had it in him all the while." It is told that he wept at a performance of *Beyond the Horizon.*

FIRST PRODUCTION

"BOUND EAST FOR CARDIFF"

The first O'Neill play to be produced was *Bound East for Cardiff*. It was done at the Wharf Theater in Provincetown as the second bill of the summer season by the group that was later to be known as the Provincetown Players. O'Neill acted the part of the Second Mate. I am told that his acting was not impressive, though it was not altogether bad.

Then came *Thirst*, in the fourth bill, and again O'Neill acted, this time as the Negro Sailor. Except for his appearance in a New York production of *Before Breakfast*, in which he undertook the rôle of the Arm of the non-speaking character, these are the only plays of his own in which he has acted.

That O'Neill was appreciated in those early days is clear from statements made by Frank Shay and others, and in the following passage recently written by Miss Kenton:

"'You don't know 'Gene yet,' he [Cook] told me. 'You don't know his plays. But you will. And the world will know 'Gene's plays some day. This year, on the night he first came to Provincetown and read us *Bound East for*

Cardiff, we knew we had something to go on with.'" Shay tells me that he and others who saw the first O'Neill productions felt at once that the writer of them had something indescribably powerful in his make-up. "The effect produced on us by *Bound East* and *Thirst* was so strong we all felt instinctively we had had a profound experience."

Susan Glaspell, too, was just as deeply stirred. "I may see it through memories too emotional," she writes, "but it seems to me I have never sat before a more moving production than our *Bound East for Cardiff*. . . . Jig [Cook] was Yank." The night of the opening there was a fog in the harbor, just as it is described in the script. "The tide was in, and it washed under us and around, spraying through the holes in the floor."

THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYERS

After the summer season the group returned to New York and, as the Provincetown Players, opened the Playwrights' Theater in Macdougal Street. That name was given it at O'Neill's suggestion, and he insisted that only new American plays should be performed, because

some of the group wanted to experiment with Chekhov and other foreigners.

During the next four years all but one of his short plays were produced here.

But from the very first he had been trying his hand at long plays. He had worked hard after leaving the "san," at the Rippins' home and at Cambridge under Professor Baker. He tells me that the stories describing him as a boor in the classroom are inventions. "I was one of the hardest-working students of the lot. But it's true that once someone started charting a Thomas play on the blackboard to show how it was built. I got up and left the room." At Provincetown Kemp says he never knew anyone who labored so consistently and so regularly. It was reasonable to hope that he might some day sell a manuscript to a Broadway manager. He not only hoped, he worked and planned.

THE SMART SET AND ITS EDITORS

Meantime there were other channels, other methods of making his way toward Broadway. Already in 1916 the venturesome Frank Shay had published in his *Provincetown Plays*

O'Neill's *Before Breakfast* and *Bound East for Cardiff*. But there were wider vistas opening out to him. Like many of us who were growing up in those exciting years of 1917 and 1918, O'Neill used to read the criticisms of Mencken and Nathan in the Smart Set, and he felt that these men represented a fresh attitude toward life and literature. For myself, I can say that their occasional words of cheer always spurred me on. A pat on the back from either of them kept me going for months. So it was with O'Neill. Both editors were ready to help and advise, and the gray checks were always welcome.

> "The first [general] recognition of any kind that I received," says O'Neill, "was through The Smart Set. I sent three of my one-acters to Mencken, the editor. They were all three fo'c'sle plays, not at all the kind of thing The Smart Set prints. I wrote Mencken that I knew this, but that I merely wanted his opinion of them. I had a fine letter from him, saying that he liked them and was sending them to George Jean Nathan, the dramatic critic. I received a letter from Nathan also, and to my surprise the three plays were published in The Smart Set! . . ."

O'Neill admits that this statement needs modification. For one thing, the Provincetown Players had already acted his plays, and

Seven Arts Magazine printed not only his story *Tomorrow,* but accepted *In the Zone* for publication.

But the printing of his plays in the Smart Set gave him a wider public than he had been accustomed to address, and recognition from Mencken and Nathan meant a sort of disinterested and impersonal critical approval.

In April, 1919, he wrote me: "My debt of gratitude to both Nathan and Mencken is great. From the first time they read two of my sea plays they have given me many a boost in spirit by their fair criticism and words of encouragement."

The three plays printed in the Smart Set were *The Long Voyage Home, 'Ile,* and *The Moon of the Caribbees.* They appeared in 1917 and 1918. It was later through the interest and enthusiasm of Nathan that *Beyond the Horizon* and *Gold* were brought to the attention of John D. Williams, and he was instrumental in selling *Anna Christie* and *The Fountain.*

TRYING TO SELL PLAYS

Even before O'Neill went to Harvard he had tried to place manuscripts through his own

efforts. "I sent two of the plays," he says, "to a New York manager. After two years, having heard nothing from them, I wrote asking for their return." The same old story. George C. Tyler told O'Neill afterward that he had never read the scripts, "because plays by actors' sons are never good!"

Though his plays have sometimes suffered from inadequate production and he has received a good deal of unintelligent criticism, O'Neill has no outstanding cause for complaint against the professional or semi-professional world. If commercial managers returned his manuscripts, there were always the Provincetown Players and later the Greenwich Village Theater, ready to risk money and time and labor on any play he might offer—with an occasional lift from O'Neill himself.

OUR LEADING DRAMATIST

Since the production of *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920 his position as our leading dramatist has not been seriously challenged, in spite of nasty attacks on him in which a certain amount of sound sense is nearly buried under indiscrim-

inate abuse. The record from that time on is brief and so far as mere biographical data are concerned of no great moment. Such facts as I think necessary for the proper understanding of his plays I shall mention in connection with my analysis of the individual works. He has three times received the Pulitzer Prize, and once a medal for artistic achievement by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1926 he was given the degree of Doctor of Literature at Yale, as a "creative contributor of new and moving forms to one of the oldest of the arts, as the first American playwright to receive both wide and serious recognition upon the stage of Europe." As he stood before the august assemblage of professors, trustees, scholars and mandarins at New Haven, he must have smiled to himself as he recalled the day when, sixteen years before, he had been fired from Princeton for "general hell-raising."

His fame has spread abroad: his plays are produced and read in England and France, Germany, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and the Scandinavian countries; two of his plays have been seen in Japan. At the age of forty he has become an almost legendary figure. That such fame has already done him some harm

cannot be doubted, but I hardly think it can seriously alter his determination to pursue his own course in his own way.

Yet he is not known on the lecture platform, and if he asked for a ticket at the box-office of a Broadway theater there is probably not a soul who would recognize him. He rarely goes to the theater, preferring to read plays.* He used to let Cook supervise the production of his one-acters at the Playwrights' Theater, and even now he attends very few rehearsals of his plays. The nervous strain is too great, especially when he sees something going wrong with the acting. The only plays he has actually seen through in

* "I hardly ever go to the theater . . . although I read all the plays I can get. I don't go to the theater because I can always do a better production in my mind. . . . Nor do I ever go to see one of my own plays—have seen only three of them since they started coming out. My real reason for this is that I was practically brought up in the theater . . . and I know (. . . too much about) the technique of acting. . . . (Acting, except when rarely inspired, simply gets between me and the play.) . . ." New York *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 10, 1924.

AUTHOR'S NOTE. Here, and later, I indicate the words or passages from published interviews which have been added to by O'Neill in my MS. or proofs. It was necessary to do this, because O'Neill says that in nearly all the interviews there are errors.—"You have had enough experience to know how damnably inaccurate such interviews usually are. I can truthfully say that where I did not write out the stuff, what I have said has always been misrepresented. You could quote me to this effect . . . if you like." (Letter, 14 May, 1926).—B. H. C.

rehearsal are *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *The Great God Brown*.

He doesn't like to be interviewed, and when he is he says very little. Except when he is among intimate friends, he still seems rather "uneasy and inarticulate." When Benjamin de Casseres first met him several years ago he saw a "tragic, dignified, uncommunicative person; if he had said anything at all to me it probably would have been: 'Excuse me for not being nice, but I've just returned from hell.'" He is so seclusive that he will not eat in a restaurant if he can help it. He may like publicity and the ordinary forms of adulation accorded to well-known personages, but no one would ever know it. He is a shy, retiring artist, sensitive and nervous. Except where his art is concerned, he does not give much of a damn about anything.

For two or three years he spent much of the time at Brook Farm near Ridgefield, Connecticut, with his wife and the two children of his second marriage. Summers since 1918 (with one exception) he has spent at Peaked Hill,* a

* "I wish you could see my place up here. It's an old U. S. life-saving station with not a house within three miles except

lonely made-over life-saving station near Provincetown, but from 1925 to 1927 he lived most of the time in a house at Paget East, Bermuda.

In 1918 he married Agnes Boulton. There are two children—a boy of nine and a younger daughter. Early in 1928 O'Neill went to Europe and then to the Far East, where he spent several months, returning to America in the spring of 1929.

He spends nearly half his day writing and the rest of the time he devotes to swimming, tennis, boating and other forms of exercise. During his residence at Ridgefield he was even regarded by the community as almost a human citizen. If additional proof of his "good" habits are required, I refer you to the *American Magazine* for November, 1922, where a special article on him appeared, supplemented by a full-page portrait. The writer set the seal of middle-class approval upon him when she declared that he had a "regular habit of work."

From 1923 to 1927 he was associated with Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones in the management of the Greenwich Village

the new station which is down the beach about half a mile away. If you get up Cape way at all this summer be sure and come over to 'the Outside.' I'll promise the uniqueness of the place will repay you for the difficulty of getting here." (Letter to me, June, 1919.)

Theater, and for a short period after the reorganization of the Provincetown group he was one of its associate directors. He now acts in a purely advisory capacity.

Here, then, is a brief outline of the life of Eugene O'Neill up to the age of forty. It will be necessary to go over some of the same ground again in connection with my study of his work, for as I have said, the plays are closely related to a lot that he has seen and heard. O'Neill is a man who has lived first and written afterward, not a writer who makes deliberate use of his experiences as copy.

THE PLAYS OF O'NEILL

DRINKING

"ASK him what he used to drink," George Jean Nathan advised when I inquired how far I might go in discussing personal matters. "I know he used to take his whiskey straight, but in South America he must have had strange and wonderful concoctions. Remember, if he hadn't drunk the way he did and mixed with so many kinds of people in those early days we probably shouldn't have had his plays."

Not a bad idea, but I don't think the *kind* of drink makes so much difference. I see no falling off in our native literature since Prohibition, and conclude that the quality of a man's potations cannot seriously affect the quality of his writing. If it weren't that a good part of the O'Neill legend centered round the question of drink I could dismiss the matter by saying that as a young man he drank heavily on occasion, while during the past decade or so he has indulged only on rare occasions. "Altogether too much damn nonsense," he told me, "has been

written since the beginning of time about the dissipation of artists. Why, there are fifty times more real drunkards among the Bohemians who play at art, and probably more than that among the people who never think about art at all. The artist drinks, when he drinks at all, for relaxation, forgetfulness, excitement, for any purpose except his art. You've got to have all your critical and creative faculties about you when you're working. I never try to write a line when I'm not strictly on the wagon. I don't think anything worth reading was ever written by anyone who was drunk or even half-drunk when he wrote it. This is not morality. It's physiology. Dope I know nothing about, but I suspect even De Quincey was boasting what a devil he was!"

Just when O'Neill began writing I am not sure, but I think it was in 1909, either before or during his first long trip. He wrote verse. It must have been crude and imitative, judging from the samples I have seen in the New London *Telegraph*, written three years afterward. These come next in order, for if he wrote anything else in his years of wandering, there is no record of it, and O'Neill doesn't remember.

Frederick P. (now Judge) Latimer, as I have already said, ran the New London *Telegraph*

when O'Neill was a reporter. But besides his reporting the young man contributed light verse during the autumn and early winter of 1912.

A "COLYUM" POET

I recently went through the old files of the *Telegraph* in the New London Public Library. The O'Neill contributions, except his reportorial write-ups, which I did not identify, are verses on the editorial page, most of them in a "colyum" under the heading *Laconics*. The first was printed August 26, and the last December 9. They are all signed, sometimes E. O'Neill, sometimes Eugene O'Neill, once "Tigean Te Oa'Neill," and once (to an ambitious political parody on *Hiawatha*) Eugene Gladstone O'Neill. The twenty-four pieces show little beyond a youthful eagerness to play with verse-forms, though some have a touch of the earnestness which was to become one of his outstanding characteristics as a dramatist. Every one of them is a parody on some well-known poet or an imitation of some characteristic poem. The chief influences I detected were Kipling and Villon, and the best parodies were on Walt Mason, Burns and Service. The year

1912 was teeming with political interest, and several of the longer verses were pointed topical satires. The following specimen, which I reprint entire, is characteristic. It appeared on September 28.

IT'S GREAT WHEN YOU GET IN

They told me the water was lovely,
  That I ought to go for a swim,
The air was maybe a trifle cool,
  "You won't mind it when you get in."

So I journeyed cheerfully beachward,
  And nobody put me wise,
But everyone boosted my courage
  With an earful of jovial lies.

The Sound looked cold and clammy,
  The water seemed chilly and gray,
But I hastened into my bathing suit
  And floundered into the spray.

Believe me, the moment I touched it
  I realized then and there
That the fretful sea was not meant for me,
  But fixed for a polar bear.

I didn't swim for distance,
  I didn't do the crawl
(They asked why I failed to reach the raft,
  And I told them to hire a hall),

But I girded my icy garments
Round my quaking limbs so blue,
And I beat it back to the bath house
To warm up for an age or two.

I felt like a frozen mummy
In an icy winding sheet.
It took me over an hour
To calm my chattering teeth.

And I sympathized with Perry,
I wept for Amundsen's woes,
As I tried to awaken some life in
My still unconscious toes.

So be warned by my experience
And shun the flowing sea,
When the chill winds of September
Blow sad and drearily.

Heed not the tempter's chatter,
Pass them the skeptic's grin,
For the greatest bull that a boob can pull
Is "It's great when you get in."

—E. G. O'Neill.

Perhaps it was not altogether chance that led him to hand in as his farewell contribution a parody on *Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,* the refrain of which expresses a loathing for the December weather.

As I look through the other "poems" I find a great deal that is callow, an occasional touch

of vulgarity, and but few signs of any literary gift. Yet there is a line here and there that brings you to a sudden stop. The following quatrain might stand appropriately on the title-page of *The Moon of the Caribbees:*

> For it's grand to lie on the hatches
> In the glowing tropic night,
> When the sky is clear and the stars seem near
> And the wake is a trail of light.

A few verses were written at the sanatorium, but by that time O'Neill had begun seriously thinking of the theater. His contributions to the *Telegraph* were his artistic wild oats, and I have referred to them only because they are a part of his development as a writer. At O'Neill's request I have gladly omitted a few other samples transcribed from the *Telegraph.* "You're reading meanings into my stuff," he told me. "I was trying to write popular humorous journalistic verse for a small-town paper, and the stuff should be judged—nearly all of it—by that intent."

THE EARLIEST PLAYS

Of the thirteen plays he wrote before going to Cambridge, only six have survived. The

earliest, which was never produced or published, was called *A Wife for Life*. It was written for the vaudeville stage. The idea for it had occurred to him when he was playing the Orpheum circuit with his father. It was the first and last play he ever wrote with his eye altogether on the box-office. He says it was the worst thing he ever did.

The actual writing was finished shortly after he left Gaylord.

The first play that was preserved is *The Web*. It was written early in the fall of 1913, and printed in the *Thirst* volume the next year.

"THIRST" AND OTHER PLAYS

Of the one-acters written in 1914, only *Thirst*, *Recklessness*, *Warnings*, and *Bound East for Cardiff* were kept. A long play, *Bread and Butter*, and a short one, *Abortion*, were destroyed without having been acted. *Thirst* and *Bound East* were produced by the Provincetown Players two years later.

This brings us up to the first group of plays about which we can form any judgment, *Thirst*, and the four others in the volume with it.

The five plays in the *Thirst* volume are now

definitely repudiated, and will never be reprinted with the author's permission. Only two have had authorized productions—*Thirst* and *Fog*, though all of them have been acted by amateurs.

The Web comes first in the order of composition. It will give satisfaction to those who complain of O'Neill's profanity to know that the earliest of his surviving plays opens with "Gawd! What a night!" * This is a crude melodramatic piece about a prostitute and her protector. The scene is a "squalid bedroom on the top floor of a rooming house on the lower East Side, New York." The woman has a baby, which annoys Steve, and when he knocks the woman down another man comes to the rescue in the nick of time. She is told by the bully that if she leaves or "holds out" on him he will send her to jail and deprive her of the child. Caught in the web. The newcomer, a fugitive from justice, is attracted by the woman and gives her money to go away with; but Steve, who has been hiding, reenters, kills the other man and "plants" the revolver in order

* I must tell of the censor in Dallas who, before allowing *Anna Christie* to be acted, insisted on changing all the "Gods" to "Gawds." It was the same lady who made Anna substitute the word "place" for "house," which didn't sound nice.

to implicate the woman when the police arrive, which they don't fail to do the next moment. The woman is taken away, while the baby cries "Maamaaaa." (Yes, indeed!) One of the plainclothes men takes the infant and speaks to it: "Mama's gone now. I'm your mama now." Curtain.

In spite of the artificiality of the plot, the end is almost affecting.

Thirst is more original in conception. It is called a "tragedy." There are three characters: a gentleman, a dancer, and a West Indian mulatto sailor, and the scene passes on the life raft of a wrecked steamer in mid-ocean. "Here and there on the still surface of the sea, the fins of sharks may be seen slowly cutting the surface of the water in lazy circles." This is hard on the director, isn't it? The play opens with these lines:

> THE DANCER—(*Raising herself to a sitting posture and turning piteously to the Gentleman.*) "My God! My God! This silence is driving me mad! Why do you not speak to me? Is there no ship in sight yet?"

The episode shows three sorry remnants of humanity dying of thirst. The sailor sits apart crooning a "monotonous negro song." The gentleman and the dancer are convinced that he

has a supply of drinking water hidden somewhere, and the woman approaches him and offers her necklace for a drink, but the sailor persists in denying that he has water. The woman then offers herself, but the stolid negro is still unmoved. Then she dies. The negro begins to show an interest in life, sharpens his knife and, glancing toward the body, addresses the gentleman: "We shall eat. We shall drink," whereupon the gentleman pushes the woman's body into the sea. The negro, mad with rage, plunges his knife into the other's back, is himself caught in the desperate embrace of the wounded man, and the two totter off the edge of the raft. "The sun glares down like a great angry eye of God. . . . On the raft the diamond necklace lies glittering in the blazing sunshine."

The play is written in an exaggerated, violent and rhetorical style, but there is an air of sincerity about it. The idea is reminiscent of Jack London and I imagine the development of the situation owes something to the vivid scenes in the closing chapters of *The Call of the Wild.*

The best that can be said of *Thirst* is that it is a forthright and daring melodramatic scene.

Recklessness is a swift-moving drama of revenge, as conventional as any Grand Guignol

thriller. A husband returns home to learn that his wife is having an affair with the chauffeur; after getting his facts from a jealous maid, he sends the chauffeur out, knowing that the steering-gear of the car is out of order—and we are supposed to shudder at the knowledge that he rides to certain death. As his body is brought in the woman kills herself.

Warnings is in two scenes. The first shows us a wireless operator at home. A typical slice of life from the bread-and-butter Bronx type of realistic play popularized by Eugene Walter. Knapp is employed aboard a transatlantic liner, and has just learned that he is in danger of becoming stone-deaf at any moment, but for the sake of his family he doesn't dare tell his employers.

The second scene is laid in Knapp's cabin aboard ship in mid-ocean. The steamer is sinking and the operator is desperately signaling for help, but can get no answer.

"Oh, my God! It's come!" he says to the Captain. "I can't hear anything. It's happened just as the doctor said it might. . . . Oh, I should have told you, sir, before we started—but we're so poor, and I . . ." etc. He then shoots himself.

There is the germ of a corking good play

here, but the young dramatist worked out his idea too literally and obviously. To begin with, it was hardly necessary to write a whole scene showing Knapp's family: all he had to do was to make it clear that the operator could not afford to give up his job. Then—a more serious matter—there was no need for Knapp to blurt out what the doctor had told him. If he had suddenly and without warning lost his hearing, he could hardly be blamed for that, and since he was prepared to lie about it he might easily have planned to lie if by chance he were to be forced to do so. Of course, the point is that he feels his responsibility, but it might take some time for his conscience to drive him to a confession of guilt.

Fog is the best thing in the book. It is the earliest of the O'Neill plays to show the playwright's attempt to reach out beyond the limits of literal surface realism—or rather, the first to carry out successfully the particular kind of super-naturalism he was later to use with notable effect.

The scene is the "life-boat of a passenger-steamer drifting helplessly off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. A dense fog lies heavily upon the still sea." The characters are a Poet, a Man of Business, a Polish Peasant Woman,

a Dead Child, Sailors, and an Officer. In the boat are the Poet, the Business Man, the Woman and her Dead Child. They drift up to the edge of an iceberg, where they wait for help. They hear a steamer whistle, but the Poet prevents the Business Man from calling, in order to save the steamer from running into the iceberg. We see by this time that the play is not conceived as a realistic transcript of life: the Poet is a symbolic embodiment of idealism, and the Business Man an abstract figure suggesting materialism. For the moment it looks as though all were lost; then the fog lifts and the boat approaches. The sailors have been guided to them by the voice of the child. Meantime the peasant woman has died.

The scene is quite dramatic:

> THE OFFICER—Too bad! But the child is all right, of course?
>
> THE POET—The child has been dead twenty-four hours. He died at dawn yesterday . . .

Fog is a parable with a sudden flash of beauty at the end. Technically it foreshadows the so-called Expressionistic scenes in *The Hairy Ape*.

What we should think of the five plays in *Thirst* if we knew nothing else of their author's work is now hard to say. It is easy to see in them an occasional indication of talent, to read

into them signs of promise—in the light of the dramatist's later work. But I cannot honestly regard them as more than experiments by a somewhat talented beginner. They show some knowledge of the technical side of play-building, and they are potentially dramatic. Best of all, they show the young man trying to tell something about life. Except in *Warnings*, he has gone to the heart of his situation and hit the nail on the head; but in characterization and dialogue he is noticeably deficient. Here he follows fiction and melodrama; he is not yet able to utilize to any great extent what he knows of life and he is, naturally enough for a beginner, too eager to introduce violence in the form of murder and suicide.

EXPERIMENT

His next two plays were full-length: *Bread and Butter*—in four acts, and *Servitude*—in three. Neither has ever been acted or printed, and in the official list they are marked "destroyed." Both were written in 1914, before O'Neill went to Harvard.

Bound East for Cardiff, the one really mature play he wrote in these 'prentice years, be-

longs to the year 1914. It was followed by *Abortion*, another one-acter, produced in 1916 but never printed. In 1915 came the two plays written in English 47, the one-act adaptation called *The Dear Doctor*, and the long play, *The Second Engineer*, also called *The Personal Equation*, which have already been mentioned. To the year 1915 also belong the one-acters *A Knock at the Door* (a comedy), *The Sniper*, and *Belshazzar*, a Biblical play in six scenes, written in collaboration with a friend and fellow-student, Colin Ford. The first and last were never acted or printed, but *The Sniper* was produced by the Provincetown Players in 1917.

I happened to see a script of *The Sniper* not many weeks ago, probably the only one in existence. It is far better than most of the plays in *Thirst*. It has to do with a Belgian peasant whose son and wife have been killed by German soldiers. In desperation he defies orders and begins picking off Prussian soldiers as they march through his village. He is soon captured and shot. Sentimental as much of the writing is, *The Sniper* is none the less an exciting little scene.

Eight short plays and one long one were written in 1916. Four of these were destroyed

without having been printed or acted: *The Movie Man*, a comedy; *Atrocity*, a pantomime; *The G. A. M.*, a farce-comedy, and *Now I Ask You*, a farce-comedy in three acts.

The plays that were kept are *Before Breakfast*, *'Ile*, *In the Zone*, *The Long Voyage Home*, and *The Moon of the Caribbees*.

In 1917 no plays were written, only the short story *Tomorrow*, which was printed in Seven Arts Magazine. It is based on an episode in the life of an Englishman O'Neill had lived with in New York. He had been a war correspondent and then suffered misfortune in many forms. "When I knew him he always lived in the land of tomorrow. When he'd get a job on a newspaper he'd last a few days and then get dead drunk on the first week's pay." The story is not particularly remarkable. In 1918 he wrote the first of his long plays that reached the stage, *Beyond the Horizon*. Only two of that year's plays were not produced: *Till We Meet* and *Shell-shock*, both in one act. *The Rope*, *The Dreamy Kid*, and *Where the Cross Is Made*—all in one act—were acted and published. A long play—*The Straw*, produced in 1921—was written toward the end of the year.

Then in 1919 came three one-act plays:

Honor Among the Bradleys, *The Trumpet*, and *Exorcism*. Only *Exorcism* was produced, and none have been printed. *Exorcism* has to do with a young man who finds life hard to bear in the slums and dives where he is forced to exist. He takes poison, but two drunken friends call a doctor in time to save him. He wakes up to find that his attempt at suicide has been totally misunderstood by his wife and friends.

The long play, *Chris Christopherson*, was also written in 1919.

From this time on he wrote no more one-act plays.

With the production of *Beyond the Horizon* early in 1920, O'Neill's period of apprenticeship came to a close.

> "I am no longer interested," he said in 1924,[5] "in the one-act play. It is an unsatisfactory form —cannot go far enough. The one-act play, however, is a fine vehicle for something poetical, for something spiritual in feeling that cannot be carried through a long play."

"THE MOON OF THE CARIBBEES" AND OTHER ONE-ACTERS

Early in 1919 *The Moon of the Caribbees and Six Other Plays of the Sea* was published in

book form. Besides the title play the volume included *Bound East for Cardiff*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *In the Zone*, *'Ile*, *Where the Cross Is Made*, and *The Rope*.

The first of these I ever saw produced was *In the Zone*. The impression of that production was still fresh in my mind when in May, 1919, I opened the new volume. I was reviewing books for the *Sun* then, and I told Grant Overton, the book editor, that I thought this O'Neill man deserved a special article. "Go ahead," he assented. "I've heard fine things about that young fellow. I'll give you all the space you need."

My article ended with the words:

> "Having demonstrated his skill in the one-act form and, at least to me and his manager, in the three-act, I see no reason why O'Neill should fail to be recognized as our leading dramatist. O'Neill is not perfect, he is not free from defects of characterization and style, but he is better equipped than any other young American. He promised five years ago, with his *Thirst* and other plays; since then he has fulfilled his promise; he has now only to develop, to widen his vision of men and women and do his best, unhampered by the material success that is sure to come to him."

In this article I had given high praise to *In the Zone*, but my remarks called forth an interesting letter, in which he said:

". . . I by no means agree with you in your high estimate of *In the Zone*. To me it seems the least significant of all the plays. It is too facile in its conventional technique, too full of clever theatrical tricks, and its long run as a successful headliner in vaudeville proves conclusively to my mind that there must be 'something rotten in Denmark.' At any rate, this play in no way represents the true me or what I desire to express. It is a situation drama lacking in all spiritual import—there is no big feeling for life inspiring it. Given the plot and a moderate ability to characterize, any industrious playwright could have reeled it off. . . . I consider *In the Zone* a conventional construction of the theater as it is."

I feel that O'Neill was here expressing his impatience over popular approval. *In the Zone* had made a hit; how, therefore, could it be good? It is an episode that takes place aboard the tramp steamer *Glencairn*. The year is 1915, and the time midnight, just after the ship has entered the submarine zone. In the fo'c'sle the sailors are in a state of high nervous tension. One of them, Smitty, behaves suspiciously, and this leads the others to believe he is a German spy. They start to take from his trunk a box which they dump first in a pail of water and then open. Then Smitty enters, is caught by the others and bound to his bunk. They find only a bundle of letters from the

girl Smitty had been engaged to, and in reading them they learn what has happened: he had been thrown over because he drank, and gone to sea in desperation. As the story unfolds, the men are ashamed, and at last release Smitty in silence. From one of the letters a dried flower flutters and falls to the floor. How O'Neill must regret that touch!

But for all its conventionality, *In the Zone*[6] belongs in the O'Neill canon just as logically as the far better *Moon of the Caribbees.* It belongs because sentiment of a rather obvious sort, and soft-heartedness and pity and romance are in the make-up of Smitty and Cocky and nearly all the other characters in the group of his four one-acters later produced under the general title of *S. S. Glencairn. In the Zone* is a bit of sentimental drama, smooth and theatrically effective. But for this very reason it is a necessary part of the tetralogy.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SEA PLAYS

The curious thing about the play is that without the three others in the group it is not so true to life nor so effective; and it is no less curious that *The Moon of the Caribbees, Bound*

East and *The Long Voyage Home* without *In the Zone* are incomplete, and not so true or so effective either as drama or as a picture of fo'c'sle life. Whether I would have discovered this as a stay-at-home playgoer I don't know, but I was myself once a seaman on an English cattle steamer, bound from Boston to London. That was in 1909, two years before O'Neill's own first venture of that sort on a British cattle steamer. The *S. S. Lancastrian*, of less than 3,000 tons' burden, was a typical tramp: no cabins, no water but the rusty lukewarm stuff we gave the cattle, and food we were glad to throw to the sharks.

The crew looked and talked like the crew of the *S. S. Glencairn* in *The Moon of the Caribbees*, only their profanity was more highly colored. They all carried knives and used them not only to cut the tough meat served us on Sunday, but to carve any other sailor they happened to get into a fight with. There was one fellow who claimed to be the younger brother of a Duke, and we called him the Juke. The same day he struck one of my friends over the eye with his knife, he was down in the hold where my brother and I were hoisting 120-pound bales of hay. The weather was "dirty" and the hatches closed, and we were a long way

from the canvas ventilators. My brother had a bad attack of sea-sickness, whereupon the Juke, instead of laughing at him, went to his rescue and carried him to the ventilator. I was surprised and touched, for the Juke took over my brother's job during the next three days. Meantime we had become acquainted and the Juke brought the other sailors to my nearly private suite—a section of steel deck 8 feet by 2½, between two rows of snorting cattle. At first I was rather afraid of so many armed men, all of them looking like pirates. But I had made a hit with them from the first because I had a few books to lend them, and all the men were fond of reading; and I listened to their reminiscences as though I believed every word.

This was exciting for a day or two, but by the end of the voyage I was disappointed in the entire crew: most of them had told me about their mothers and sweethearts and there was hardly one who didn't weep at some point of the narrative. I felt that something had gone out of my life. Where was I to find the real hard-boiled type of he-man in real life? Surely not among these rough-mannered snivelling children of the sea!

No, O'Neill wrought better than he knew when he wrote *In the Zone*. And I find on

seeing the *Glencairn* group again that O'Neill introduced into each of the plays a note of sentiment to finish off the picture. In *Bound East* Driscoll is "sayin' 'is prayers"; and in *The Long Voyage Home* a pathetic sailor is done in by landlubbers. The play closes with a touch of irony to conceal the underlying pathos, while in *The Moon of the Caribbees* we have Smitty (maybe O'Neill's original was my friend the Juke?) tenderly reminiscing.

The Moon of the Caribbees is no doubt a finer piece of work than *In the Zone*. In the letter quoted above O'Neill continues:

O'NEILL ON THE SEA PLAYS

". . . Whereas, *The Moon of the Caribbees*, for example—(my favorite)—is distinctively my own. The spirit of the sea—a big thing—is in this latter play the hero. While *In the Zone* might have happened just as well, if less picturesquely, in a boarding house of munition workers. Let me illustrate by a concrete example what I am trying to get at. Smitty in the stuffy, grease-paint atmosphere of *In the Zone* is magnified into a hero who attracts our sentimental sympathy. In *The Moon*, posed against a background of that beauty, sad because it is eternal, which is one of the revealing moods of the sea's truth, his silhouetted gestures of self-pity

are reduced to their proper insignificance, his thin whine of weakness is lost in the silence which it was mean enough to disturb, we get the perspective to judge him—and the others—and we find his sentimental posing much more out of harmony with truth, much less in tune with beauty, than the honest vulgarity of his mates. To me *The Moon* works with truth, and *Beyond the Horizon* also, while *In the Zone* substitutes theatrical sentimentalism. I will say nothing of the worth of the method used in the two short plays save that I consider *In the Zone* a conventional construction of the theater as it is, and *The Moon* an attempt to achieve a higher plane of bigger, finer values. But I hope to have all this out with you when we meet. Perhaps I can explain the nature of my feeling for the impelling, inscrutable forces behind life which it is my ambition to at least faintly shadow at their work in my plays."

I did not see *The Moon* until it was revived a year or two after it came out in book form, or I might have been more enthusiastic in reviewing it. I see in it a fairly successful attempt to suggest certain sensations through the use of rhythmical prose—not alone the spirit of the sea, but of man's loneliness in the presence of nature. O'Neill has indeed created, with the most meager effects, a background for his drama, setting against it one poor relic of broken manhood.

But something is lacking, and the play is not so complete a revelation of the dramatist's mood as he thought it. O'Neill has conceived his situation and characters as a fleeting episode in a vast epic, which is faintly suggested. The words uttered by his men and women, true and fitting as they are, somehow fail to set vibrating the epic chords within me. They are thin, they lack that richness that lends to Conrad's words (I mean his dialogue—it is not fair to compare his descriptions to the dialogue of a dramatist) the full magic of poetry. O'Neill leaves too much to the director and the stage-carpenter: for drama which is poetic in conception must be poetic in execution. But *The Moon of the Caribbees* is none the less a play of considerable power. There is practically no story in it: a sailor speaks aloud his dreams and disappointments, while his mates carouse. There is a fight, a man is killed, and the curtain falls.

No wonder O'Neill looks upon this play with paternal fondness. It was, as he says, his "first real break with theatrical traditions. Once I had taken this initial step, other plays followed logically." [7]

I have already spoken of *Bound East for Cardiff*. Of the score of plays written during the first three years, this is easily the best. It

was the first of the O'Neill plays to be produced. The scene, like that of *In the Zone*, is laid in the fo'c'sle of the *S. S. Glencairn*, and the principal characters are the same as in *The Long Voyage Home* and *The Moon*. The incident occurs during a "foggy night midway on the voyage between New York and Cardiff." The sailor Yank lies dying in his bunk while the others tell yarns and exchange reminiscences. Yank takes a turn for the worse and quietly rambles on, wishing he had never gone to sea, and dies. An unpretentious episode, moving and tense, yet with scarcely a vestige of "theater." It is hard to believe that *Recklessness* and *Warnings* were written by the same man in the same year.

The Long Voyage Home is more elaborate; it is, as George Middleton said of his own one-act plays, the "epitome of a larger drama which is suggested in the background."

The scene is the bar of a "low dive on the London waterfront." The crew of the *Glencairn* have just been paid off. Olson the Swede, with two years' savings in his pocket, wisely refuses to drink. He has for years planned to go home and start farming, but every time he got his money he squandered it. At last it looks as though he were about to re-

alize his dream. But he is induced by a scheming couple to take a soft drink—which happens to be drugged. He is then robbed, carried out and put aboard another ship bound on a two years' voyage round the Horn.

His comrades come back and find him gone. They are told he has disappeared with one of the girls, and Driscoll grins: "Who'd think Ollie'd be sich a divil wid the wimmin? 'Tis lucky he's sober or she'd have him stripped to his last ha'penny. (*Turning to* COCKY, *who is blinking sleepily.*) What'll ye have, ye little scut? (*To* JOE) Give me whiskey. Irish whiskey!"

That is all. The ironic note at the end is characteristic. While there is something pathetic and painful about the incident, it is scarcely tragic. The Swede's ill fortune is brought about by a trick. Really, the fellow's predicament is no more nor less than a case of hard luck.

In *'Ile* we have something far different. The theme is one that Balzac never tired of using—the consuming passion of a man for an idea. Captain Keeney is a hard New England whaling captain dominated by an unconquerable pride. At the end of the two years' period his

crew have signed up for he has only a small part of his quota of "ile." "It ain't the damned money," he says, "what's keepin' me up in the Northern Seas, Tom, but I can't go back to Homeport with a measly four hundred barrel of ile. I'd die fust. I ain't never come back home in all my days without a full ship. Ain't that the truth?" The crew are mutinous, and the Captain's wife is almost out of her head from loneliness and anxiety. Only the prospect of her complete breakdown alters his determination to push on for the "ile," and seeing her condition he consents to sail for home; but the instant open water is ahead and whales are sighted, he reverses his decision. The woman goes crazy.

Here is the stuff of tragedy, and *'Ile* is about as near to tragedy as any one-act play can come. This is no "fixed" situation contrived to produce a theatrical "kick." A man is driven by an irresistible passion; opposed to him are a mutinous crew. His wife, whose happiness, sanity, life perhaps depend on his returning home, precipitates the tragedy. In the moment of his trial the man's character is tested to the limit; and because of what he is, he makes his momentous decision.

Do you remember Conrad's heartrending story, *Freya of the Seven Isles?* It is about a man who risked everything once too often—whose pride brought him and his bright ship to ruin. In *'Ile* O'Neill has carried over into the theater something of that tragic irony which Conrad suggests in the most perfect of his narratives.

The Moon of the Caribbees, with all its atmosphere, cannot compare with *'Ile.* In *'Ile* I feel the inevitability of the tragic ending: it seems almost as though the dramatist were holding back the ultimate truth that lies inherent in his situation, hesitating to state it in all its bald cruelty.

Does not every tragic writer face his catastrophe with a certain reluctance? It is only the second-rater who makes you feel that he rather enjoys the sorrow and terror of the figures he has created. Perhaps that is why the work of the great tragic poets is always tempered with compassion, and why O'Neill himself in certain of his later plays, while losing contact with human beings resorts to a kind of violence that seems occasionally gratuitous.

The next play in the volume is a by-product. In a letter to George Jean Nathan, O'Neill says of it:

"I suppose I shall be credited on all sides with having made *Where the Cross Is Made* into a long play, yet the reverse is the real truth. The idea of *Gold* was a long play one from its inception. I merely took the last act situation and jammed it into the one-act form because I wanted to be represented on the Provincetown Players' opening bill two seasons ago. I mention this only because I know how impossible it is to expand a natural short play into a long one, and would hardly make such a futile mistake. *Gold* was always full length to me." [8]

The play is a crude melodrama. The plot requires far too much explanation, and even when that is made, the play remains at best only a stunt. In another letter to Nathan [9] he says: ". . . But where did you get the idea that I really valued *Where the Cross Is Made?* It was great fun to write, theatrically very thrilling, an amusing experiment in treating the audience as insane—that is all it means or ever meant to me. . . ."

Since the piece is a part of the long play *Gold*, there is no use saying more about it here.

The Rope is the last play in the *Moon of the Caribbees* collection. It was the bitterest and in some respects the most mature play he had written up to the year 1918. It is largely a study in hatred. The central character is

Abraham Bentley, a miser, one of those hard, militant-Christian New Englanders, like Ephraim in *Desire Under the Elms*.

The Rope exhibits an ugly set of characters, bordering on the grotesque; though it is overladen with talk about the past history of the characters, it has gleams of grim beauty in it. "There is," as O'Neill said a few years later, "beauty even in its [life's] ugliness." I think there is no beauty that has not its roots in what is, or seems to be, ugliness. It is the artist's affair to discover, feel and at last reveal the beauty that underlies everything in the world.

The Rope is the first of a kind of play that O'Neill in after years was to develop into a powerful and effective art-form. *Diff'rent* stems from it, and *Desire Under the Elms*, both of them almost lyric emanations from the back-wash of life, hymns to the vitality of human beings. The dramatist was as yet unable to handle his materials with the ease of a finished craftsman, but he must have understood the goal he was marching toward.

"BEFORE BREAKFAST" AND "THE DREAMY KID"

There are two other one-act plays (not in *The Moon of the Caribbees* volume) that must be mentioned: *Before Breakfast* and *The Dreamy Kid.*

Before Breakfast is a technical stunt in the manner of Strindberg's *The Stronger.* Each is a monologue in which the words of the one speaking actor skillfully suggest a complete drama that is over and done with. In the O'Neill play Mrs. Rowland lives with her husband Alfred in a dingy flat. She prepares breakfast, and speaks to Alfred as he is making his toilet, telling of her struggle to make ends meet while he, "the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town . . . ," goes off drinking and gallivanting. She taunts him for having married her and refers in no uncertain terms to the girl he had really loved. Her litany swells to a climax, and subsides when she has no more to say. Silence, as she waits for an answer—then the drip-drip of something in the bedroom. Alfred has cut his throat with a razor.

The Dreamy Kid completes our record of

O'Neill's one-act plays. This play about negroes is not one of his best: it is too obvious, too direct and melodramatic to be wholly convincing. It is the story of a murderer pursued by the police, who returns to see his dying mother and gets caught.

As if to prove that he has not entirely repudiated the one-act form, O'Neill allowed Frank Shay in 1924 to bring together four of his sea plays into a unified framework under the title *S. S. Glencairn.* The plays so presented were *The Moon of the Caribbees, The Long Voyage Home, In the Zone,* and *Bound East for Cardiff.* The production of this group by Shay's Barnstormers of Provincetown was so successful that it was produced by the Jones-Macgowan-O'Neill combination at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York, where it enjoyed considerable popularity. The Provincetown Players revived the group early in 1929, with several of the actors who had played in the original productions.

In an interview[10] O'Neill says of the *S.S. Glencairn:*

> ". . . The individual plays are complete in themselves, yet the identity of the crew goes through the series and welds the four one-acts into a long play. I do not claim any originality, though, for

the idea, as Schnitzler has already done the same thing in *Anatol*. And doubtless others."

'Ile, The Moon, Bound East, and *The Long Voyage Home* were easily the most distinguished one-acters ever written by an American. During O'Neill's early years the short form sufficed for him: he had something to say, and he said it. When he was ready with a long play he was a full-fledged dramatist, not a writer of one-acters who expanded short pieces. *Beyond the Horizon* was full-grown; as a matter of fact, in its original form, it was over-grown.

"BEYOND THE HORIZON"

Five full-length plays preceded *Beyond the Horizon,* but not one of them has been preserved. Usually a sound and invariably an honest critic of his own work, O'Neill had made up his mind that he was going to keep nothing that did not represent the best that he had to give. The first I heard of *Beyond* was in a letter O'Neill wrote me in 1919:

"May I, when I retrieve a borrowed script, send you a copy of my long play, *Beyond the Horizon,*

in the hope that you will give it a reading? This play is under contract for production by John D. Williams. It is a first serious attempt to do something bigger than my short plays express, and, because of my faith in its sincerity, I would like to submit it to you. I trust it would help to justify your kind encouragement of my work—an encouragement, I assure you, that means the devil of a lot to me."

The origin of the play is explained in one of O'Neill's few printed statements: [11]

"I think," he writes, "the real life experience from which the idea of *Beyond the Horizon* sprang was this: On the British tramp steamer on which I made a voyage as ordinary seaman, Buenos Aires to New York, there was a Norwegian A. B., and we became quite good friends. The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had left the small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years, and had never gone home once in that time. . . . Yet he cursed the sea and the life it had led him—affectionately. He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been to leave the farm. There was the life for you . . . at exactly the right moment . . . he turned up in my memory. I thought, 'What if he had stayed on the farm, with his instincts? What would have happened?' But I realized at once he never would have stayed. . . . It amused him to pretend he craved the farm. He was too harmonious a creature of the God of

> Things as They Are. . . . And from that point I started to think of a more intellectual, civilized type from the standpoint of the above-mentioned God—a man who would have my Norwegian's inborn craving for the sea's unrest, only in him it would be conscious, too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague, intangible wanderlust. His powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also probably be correspondingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for—why, for almost any nice little poetical craving—the romance of sex, say."

Robert Mayo is the victim of his dreams. As he is about to embark on a long sea-voyage with his uncle, he believes he is desperately in love with the girl who is engaged to his brother Andrew; the girl impulsively throws Andrew over and accepts Robert, while Andrew sails in his place. Before long Ruth discovers that the marriage has been a mistake and is convinced that she is still in love with Andrew. Three years pass and Robert, ill and disillusioned, with only his child to comfort him, fails miserably in his efforts to make a go of the farm. Andrew returns for a short time, only to bring disillusion both to Ruth and to Robert: the woman realizes that he no longer loves her, and Robert, who had hoped to get from his brother at least

a breath of the romance he himself had longed for, finds Andrew a commonplace and unimaginative materialist. From this point onward, Robert is the central figure. We are shown the mental and physical degeneration of a man who cannot live without illusions. Indeed, each character in the play is obsessed by his desire for what he can never have—for what lies beyond the horizon.

The play made something of an impression on the public. In spite of the uneven acting, the length of the manuscript—which was later cut—and faulty direction, both critics and theater-goers were moved by the sincerity of the character-drawing in this grim and bitter tragedy of human futility. But there were few critics who gave O'Neill credit for his technical skill.

"You remember," he wrote me in March, 1920, "when you read *Beyond*, you remarked about its being an 'interesting technical experiment.' Why is it, I wonder, that not one other critic has given me credit for a deliberate departure in form in search of a greater flexibility? They have all accused me of bungling through ignorance—whereas, if I had wanted to, I could have laid the whole play in the farm interior, and made it tight as a drum a la Pinero. Then, too, I should imagine the symbolism I intended to convey by the alternating

scenes would be apparent even from a glance at the program. It rather irks my professional pride, you see, to be accused of ignorance of conventional, everyday technique—I, a Baker 47 alumnus! Professor Baker himself, whose opinion in matters of technique I value as much as any man's . . . , has both read and seen *Beyond* and is delighted with and proud of it. He never mentioned my 'clumsiness.' Perhaps he saw it but appreciated the fact that it was intentional. Well, well, how I do go on! But I've been longing to protest about this to someone ever since I read the criticisms by really good critics who blamed my youthful inexperience—even for poor scenery and the interminable waits between the scenes!"

"I was forced," O'Neill said in 1927, when the play was revived, "to telescope the last scene of the final act into the first scene of the act," and though this was required because of scene-shifting difficulties back-stage, it was an improvement. But in the revival both scenes were played. However, the whole MS. had been cut and the playing-time reduced.

After all, there was nothing strikingly novel in the division of each act into two scenes, one indoors and one out-of-doors; it was a simple way of suggesting a tide-like rhythm in the lives of the characters. Even in this first of his long plays O'Neill was striving for new methods of expression.

Beyond the Horizon has, I think, been overpraised. It was only natural that this should be so; was it not the most consistently sustained serious play yet written by an American? In 1920, and long before, we were looking for a dramatic Messiah, and *Beyond the Horizon,* with all its shortcomings, seemed to be the first sign of his arrival. But *Beyond,* if produced exactly as it was written, would require almost four hours to act. When O'Neill prepared it for republication four years ago he reduced its bulk by at least one-fifth. Furthermore, it is too often unnecessarily violent and direct in action and speech; the hand of the dramatist is too much in evidence: he pauses too often to direct our attention to what he is doing, a fault that in some of his later plays he carries to extremes. He had not quite the courage or the skill to let his characters develop themselves.

A few months after this play appeared O'Neill received the Pulitzer Prize. "When my wife wired the news," he told me, "I thought it meant some bronze medal or other, until a friend told me it was a thousand dollars. Then I came to, and paid off some of my worst debts!"

"CHRIS CHRISTOPHERSON"

The young playwright was growing, and only a few weeks after I had heard of *Beyond*, he was busy with the next script. In June he wrote that his agent had sold the "latest play, *Chris Christopherson*, which I completed this spring. . . . I would like very much to have you read *Chris*. It is a sea play—a character study of an old Swede. May I send you a copy when I get one? At present the agent and Tyler have all the scripts."

This earlier version of the play that later became *Anna Christie* I have never seen, but shortly after the production O'Neill wrote:

> "My other play, *Chris*, which opened in Atlantic City two weeks ago, is not faring very well financially and I doubt if it will come to New York under its present management. I am just as well pleased. They cut it unmercifully in my enforced absence—on the strength of an adverse decision by an Atlantic City audience, at that!—and little play is left, I guess. It is in six scenes—another experiment—and the curtain rings down before 10:30—after the cutting. You can imagine the movie effect. I'm too disgusted to witness a performance, but my agent and friends in Philly have reported to me. The play is also miserably cast. As it is a character sketch built up bit by bit you can

understand what the rough methods they used accomplished. I hope you'll be able to read this play some day soon. I know it has its faults, but I still think it doesn't deserve its present fate, and, if treated sympathetically, would find its public as *Beyond* has."

Chris was never published. After the tryout in Atlantic City and Philadelphia it closed, to appear later as *Anna Christie*.

"THE STRAW"

But *The Straw* comes next in order of composition (1918). The play is a love story about an Irish girl who meets a young newspaper man at a tuberculosis sanatorium. After a few months Stephen leaves, completely cured, to make his way as a writer, while Eileen, whose well-being depends wholly upon Stephen, remains. She has only him to live for, and when he returns—no longer in love—she loses courage. But in his masculine way Stephen makes a brave pretense, in order to give Eileen a "straw" of hope. It is not stated in so many words whether Eileen believes him or not; that is not necessary. It is only a matter of time before she will learn the truth.

Once again, as in *Beyond the Horizon*, the playwright shows his characters basing their lives upon illusion. Sometimes this takes the form of a dream of beauty, sometimes it is love, sometimes physical passion. In the later plays we shall find Ponce de Leon in quest of the illusion of love and fame, Marco Polo after the illusion of power, Lazarus after a solution of the problem of life everlasting, and Reuben Light in *Dynamo* after a religion that he can believe in; but always it is the quest that counts—the pursuit that never ends, the search for happiness, the hope for an ultimate meaning and justification of life.

In *The Straw* there is little of the expository element which sometimes interferes with the satisfactory development of O'Neill's themes, although toward the end is a passage, brief in itself but giving point to the play without throwing it out of key. Stephen asks the superintendent why they have been given a "hopeless hope," and Miss Gilpin tells him: "Isn't everything we know—just that—when you think of it? [*Her face lighting up with a consoling revelation.*] But there must be something back of it—some promise of fulfillment, —somehow—somewhere—in the spirit of hope itself."

In this play the dramatist has thrown together two young people face to face with the realities of love and passion and death. Love is a hopeless hope and so is life, yet there must be a reason. "Come, now," says Stephen, "confess, damn it! There's always hope, isn't there? What do you know? Can you say you know anything?"

The Straw is filled with a questioning perplexity, a youthful exasperation in the presence of suffering and death. There seems no reason for it all, yet there is the no less perplexing fact of hope, the presence of which seems to proclaim some pattern or intention in the scheme of the universe. Later, in *Desire Under the Elms* and *The Fountain* O'Neill was again to envisage the tragedy of futility, the heartbreaking failure of man under the pressure of inexplicable forces, yet triumphing not in spite of but because of the obstacles that seem but are not really tragic. It is for this reason that I have always considered O'Neill at bottom an optimist. He never leaves us feeling that life is not worth living. If he were as pessimistic as he is often said to be, in the first place he would not have gone to the trouble of trying to prove the futility of existence. Consider the endings of his plays; do they not

usually end with the expression of hope, even a "hopeless hope"? As a matter of fact, a fairly good case could be made out against O'Neill for reading the riddles of life a little too easily.

The Straw was not successful in the theater. I think it was too painful to please the average playgoer, and possibly too much a love story to please those who don't like to be called "average." Also, in laying the scene in a sanatorium for tubercular patients the playwright risks losing the normal point of view: I don't mean that every good play has to be flooded by God's gentle sunlight, but a dramatist who departs too far from familiar scenes is likely to alienate the sympathies of his audience. If O'Neill could be persuaded to go over the script of *The Straw* now, I think he could make it simpler, more direct, and far more impressive.

"THE EMPEROR JONES"

The production of *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 established O'Neill as a "regular" dramatist. This play, effectively mounted, well directed, and strikingly acted by the colored actor Charles Gilpin, was a popular success, and has

been often revived both with Paul Robeson and again with Gilpin.

From the viewpoint of pure "theater" *The Emperor Jones* (written 1920) is one of the best of all the O'Neill plays, though most of it is only a dramatic monologue. It is a kind of unfolding, in reverse order, of the tragical epic of the American negro.

O'Neill has told the story of the play's origin in an interview:[12]

> "The idea of *The Emperor Jones* came from an old circus man I knew. This man told me a story current in Hayti concerning the late President Sam. This was to the effect that Sam had said they'd never get him with a lead bullet; that he would get himself first with a silver one. . . . This notion about the silver bullet struck me, and I made a note of the story. About six months later I got the idea of the woods, but I couldn't see how it could be done on the stage, and I passed it up again. A year elapsed. One day I was reading of the religious feasts in the Congo and the uses to which the drum is put there: how it starts at a normal pulse and is slowly intensified until the heartbeat of everyone present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum. There was an idea and an experiment. How would this sort of thing work on an audience in a theater? The effect of the tropical forest on the human imagination was honestly

come by. It was the result of my own experience while prospecting for gold in Spanish Honduras."

The play is made up of a very few simple elements—a hunted man, a series of sharply defined pictures, and a monotonous rhythmical drumbeat (a device used by Austin Strong in his melodrama *The Drums of Oude* over twenty years ago). *The Emperor Jones* is a magnificent presentment of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized negro.

In stating my belief that it is not so fine a play as *Desire Under the Elms* or *The Great God Brown* I am not belittling the virtues of *The Emperor Jones.* It is beautifully and completely what O'Neill intended it to be; if it is not comparable to the best of the later plays it is because in the last analysis it deals with obvious forces in an obvious way. It is not built upon harmonies but on a single theme, directly stated and reiterated a little monotonously. The play reveals itself at once, not indirectly, insinuatingly, suggestively.

Am I captious in asking that *The Emperor Jones* should suggest more perhaps than the dramatist aimed at? I hardly think so. O'Neill is not merely a dramatist; if he were, this book would never have been written: he is at his best

an artist who uses the theater as a medium for the expression of his attitude toward life in terms of human character. I grant that *The Emperor Jones* is a fine achievement, but it does not belong in the highest rank of the writer's works.

In rereading the O'Neill plays I am constantly reminded of the ancient esthetic dictum that perfection in art is attainable only through an inexplicable and seemingly magic collaboration between the work of art and the beholder, and that in this process the very imperfections and shortcomings of the object arousing the stimulus are a contributing factor—that indeed without them there can be no perfection. So, with O'Neill's best work, its occasional crudeness allows us, as it were, to complete the circuit. Now in many of his plays the aim is so far from the achievement that it is not possible to do more than see what he was trying to do, and wonder that his weakest is so far below his best.

THE FAILURE OF "GOLD"

Gold (written 1920) does not "come off," but what a magnificent idea there is in it! Because of the limitations of the dramatic form

O'Neill could not entirely create a background on the huge scale of his conception: he was compelled to people his stage with characters most of whom are stiff and commonplace. Captain Bartlett, cast ashore on a desert island with a few of his crew, is a party to the murder of two of his men. He had discovered what he believes to be treasure, and crazed by thirst and a prey to suspicion, allows the crime to be committed. But already corrupted by gold, he tries to evade his moral responsibilities. The Captain and his companions are rescued, and the next act finds them, six months later, at his home on the California coast. Bartlett has fitted out another ship and is about to sail off once more in quest of his gold. His wife Sarah, ill and fearing that all is not well, opposes the venture. His son Nat, who gradually learns the facts, is seized with the madness that is consuming his father. He wants to sail with the Captain. As if to strengthen his own faith in his quest, the Captain forces Sarah, ill as she is, to christen the ship. The next day his two companions conspire to sail without him and make off with the gold themselves. But they need a captain. Young Drew, engaged to Bartlett's daughter Sue, is persuaded to go with them in Bartlett's interest, and when the Captain

is at home they sail off, while the old man stands on the hill cursing them.

The last act is a year later. It is a rewritten version of the one-acter *Where the Cross Is Made.* The schooner has been lost at sea, and the Captain, now completely a victim of hallucinations, is but the shadow of his old self. He is pursued by the fantoms of his victims and the ineradicable belief that his schooner is on the point of returning, laden with gold. His passion for the treasure has meantime killed his wife and driven Nat mad. At the very end he produces a sample of the "gold" he has kept by him in secret, and Nat in a lucid interval realizes that it is only junk. The Captain tears up the map showing where the treasure is buried, and dies.

Here is a particularly interesting idea, a broad canvas, a plot with infinite possibilities, and characters susceptible of treatment in the grand manner. But *Gold* is not much more than a courageous attempt. Captain Bartlett is no mean sniveling coward: he is potentially a Balzacian giant, a Grandet, a Gobseck. Up to the end of the play he is treated from a rigidly realistic standpoint. His venture is in its way heroic; his crimes should therefore be treated heroically, because his quest was a splendid dream.

His remorse should be commensurate with his moral stature, and we ought to be able to feel with him at every moment.

Now if I am wrong and O'Neill aimed at portraying no more than a petty adventurer, then the whole idea of *Gold* is not worth treating. But I am sure he was aiming at something bigger than that, and I suspect that he was simply not equal to his theme. The play seems to be the dramatization of an idea, not a living organism. Instead of allowing the characters to go their way and make their own situation, O'Neill guided and directed them, and in default of that white heat which welds together such elements as O'Neill has imagined, he resorts to the feeble expedient of explanation. Time and again his characters stop to tell us what they are doing and why, instead of going ahead and doing it. In no other early play are his basic shortcomings more strikingly evident.

AN AUSTRIAN POET ON O'NEILL

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in one of the most acute criticisms of O'Neill yet written, takes the American to task for this very fault. "It is," he says, "a little disappointing to a European

with his complex background to see the arrow strike the target toward which he has watched it speeding all the while." Elsewhere in the same article [18] he adds: "The reason for this general weakness is, I think, that the dramatist, unable to make his dialogue a complete expression of human motives, is forced at the end simply to squeeze it out like a wet sponge."

Gold is too good to be left as a partly realized work. I hope O'Neill will rewrite it some day, either as melodrama pure and simple or as a play of character without psychological comment from the outside.

"ANNA CHRISTIE"

I have said before that *Anna Christie* (written 1920) was the outgrowth of an earlier play, *Chris*, or *Chris Christopherson*. It was also at one time called *De Old Davil*. This most widely popular of all his early plays seems to have given the dramatist a good deal of trouble. Just how to end it was one of his biggest problems, as we shall see.

In its final version *Anna Christie* is a play about a woman. It was in the beginning a play about the woman's father.

I have already told about Jimmy the Priest's, where O'Neill lived for a while in New York. It was there that he met the man who became Chris Christopherson. In fact, the two were room-mates:

> "He had sailed the sea until he was sick of the mention of it. But it was the only work he knew. At the time he was my room-mate he was out of work, wouldn't go to sea and spent the time guzzling whiskey and razzing the sea. In time he got a coal barge to captain. One Christmas Eve he got terribly drunk and tottered away about 2 o'clock in the morning for his barge. The next morning he was found frozen on a cake of ice between the piles and the dock. In trying to board the barge he stumbled on the plank and fell over." [14]

The story has to do with the regeneration of Anna under the influence of the sea and the love of a man. It is not until long after her arrival at Jimmy the Priest's that her father learns she has been living for a time as a prostitute. But it is made clear—it is at least asserted and reiterated—that she has preserved a virginal soul, and when she confesses to Burke that she never really loved any man before she met him, we are willing to believe her—at the time. Living happily on her father's barge, she is ready for a "pure" love when her hero emerges out of the blackness of the fog. Their

passion develops rapidly up to the point where Anna confesses, then the man reacts, instinctively rebelling against the idea of marrying the kind of woman he had been used to hiring on occasion. But after getting drunk he returns to her, and the two are united.

Now for O'Neill's problem. Here are a few sentences from a letter written to George Jean Nathan [15] in 1921:

> "Your criticism certainly probes the vital spot. The devil of it is, I don't see my way out. From the middle of the third act I feel the play ought to be dominated by the woman's psychology, and I have a conviction that dumb people of her sort, unable to voice strong, strange feelings, the emotions can find outlet only through the language and gestures of the heroics in the novels and movies they are familiar with—that is, that in moments of great stress life copies melodrama. Anna forced herself on me, middle of third act, at her most theatric. In real life I felt she would unconsciously be compelled, through sheer inarticulateness, to the usual 'big scene' and wait hopefully for her happy ending. And as she is the only one of the three who knows exactly what she wants, she would get it. And the sea outside—life—waits. The happy ending is merely the comma at the end of a gaudy introductory clause, with the body of the sentence still unwritten. (In fact, I once thought of calling the play *Comma.*) Of course, this sincerity of life pent up in the trappings of theater is impossible to

project clearly, I guess. The two things cancel and negate each other, resulting, as you have said, in a seeming H. A. Jones compromise. Yet it is queerly fascinating to me because I believe it's a new, true, angle."

O'Neill understood his difficulty. The projection of "sincerity of life" was his problem in *Anna Christie*, but when he was writing the play he discovered that plot—"trappings of theater"—unless it is determined and shaped by character, may become the arch-enemy of character. His plot was to a certain extent predetermined, but when he got deeper into the heart and mind of Anna he found that he must falsify either one thing or the other, character or the plot as he had outlined it. But the trouble lay still deeper: from the very beginning he had made the mistake of not deciding exactly whose play it was to be, Anna's or Chris's. From this confusion came the rebelliousness of his plot before he finished with it. He found his flesh-and-blood people chafing under the restraint of "theater," which means that his knowledge of people was at that moment clearer than his knowledge of play-construction. The diverse elements are not completely fused, and while the result is momentarily and superficially effective, it is not wholly

convincing as an interpretation of character. The play won popular success because of its intrinsic effectiveness in separate scenes, and as a whole because of its threadbare but always "safe" philosophy.

In the letter to Nathan, O'Neill admits he is afraid he hasn't made his "comma" clear:

> "My ending seems to have a false definiteness about it that is misleading—a happy-ever-after which I did not intend. I relied on the father's last speech of superstitious uncertainty to let my theme flow through and on. It does not do this rightly. I now have the stoker not entirely convinced by the oath of a non-Catholic, although he is forced by his great want to accept her in spite of this. In short, that all of them at the end have a vague foreboding that, although they have had their moment, the decision still rests with the sea which has achieved the conquest of Anna."

What O'Neill may not have seen was that the union of two lovers *is* a happy ending, no matter what is hinted at regarding their future.* This is not only a convention of the theater, it is a psychological fact, because for the time being a man and a woman in love are

* In his long letter to the *Times* (16 Dec., 1921), O'Neill argues the point in detail. He says . . . "Meaning that I wish it understood as unhappy? Meaning nothing of the kind. Meaning what I have said before, that the play has no ending. . . . The curtain falls. Behind it their lives go on."

happy at the prospect of marriage. *They* don't know what's coming, and the audience don't care, so what difference if the kill-joy author shouts aloud that all is not well? He no doubt felt that in life Anna and Burke would under the circumstances marry, and he was quite right in closing his play with that situation. But at the same time he didn't want to write the usual play about a prostitute "purified" by love; that seemed too conventional, so he took a woman who was really not a prostitute at all, but a normal healthy girl who drifted almost by accident into a profession that was distasteful to her. She is capable of love, and we are sure there is nothing vicious in her at all.

But is not this a fatal weakness in the play? For purposes of dramatic effect she is at first shown to be a vulgar, cynical streetwalker; at the proper moment she breaks down and confesses to her lover, and after it has been asserted that she is really "pure" in soul she is ready to marry the "hero." In this way the playwright tried to do more than he legitimately could do: shock us by the spectacle of "vice," and then turn round and ask us to forget it. No, Anna is hardly consistent.

Fundamentally, the point of the play is obscured. If Anna were really affected by her

new life it is necessary that she should undergo some radical conversion besides that brought about by her passion for Burke, but since she never was a real daughter of joy her only problem is the minor problem of readjustment to a life in circumstances different from what she had been used to. Supposing, however, that she had been really vicious, that—though she had never loved any man she met in the way of business—she had had to fight the allurements of the flesh, would not this have been the basis for a really great drama? As it is, the issue is only too clear and the struggle hardly worth showing. In fact, there is scarcely any struggle at all.

Anna Christie was not conceived in its entirety, or rather it was conceived as at least two separate plays. Its outstanding merits lie in occasional scenes and in matters of detail. The first act, for instance, is exceptionally good, though not the height of perfection that most critics declare it to be; the character of Chris—except for over-insistence on the "old davil sea" motif—is admirable; the dialogue on the whole is better than anything (except in *The Moon of the Caribbees* and *'Ile*) he had written up to that time. But in spite of some of the most

skillful play-writing we have seen on our stage, *Anna Christie* is not right.

"DIFF'RENT"

The somber two-act play, *Diff'rent* (written 1920), was never a great success in the theater, even with the help of the censor who tried to stop it, and there are few even among O'Neill's admirers who care much for it. It was not received very favorably, and shortly after the opening O'Neill wrote to Nathan referring to the poor "press." He says: "Well, this is rather reassuring. I had begun to think I was too popular to be honest."

In this play O'Neill shows a firm grasp of his situation; he knew his characters and was able to make them speak and act, not according to his scenario, but as they would do in life. In *Diff'rent* I am not conscious of the interplay of intellectual motives nor, until the very end, of the directing idea or guiding hand of the dramatist. As a matter of fact I am present at a situation which is determined by human beings.

Emma Crosby learns that Caleb Williams, a

sailing captain to whom she is engaged, has had an affair with a native woman in the South Sea Islands. She has always believed him sexually pure, "diff'rent" from other men, and the shock of the discovery causes her to break off the engagement. The second act is laid in Emma's home thirty years later. Emma is an embittered victim of sex-suppression. Caleb's nephew Benny, an American doughboy recently returned from France, is deliberately "stringing" the old maid in order to get money out of her.

"*As the curtain rises,* EMMA *and* BENNY ROGERS *are discovered. She is seated in a rocker by the table. He is standing by the victrola on which a jazz band record is playing. He whistles, goes through the motions of dancing to the music. He is a young fellow of twenty-three, a replica of his father in Act One, but coarser, more hardened and cocksure. He is dressed in the khaki uniform of a private in the United States Army. The thirty years have transformed* EMMA *into a withered, scrawny woman. But there is something revoltingly incongruous about her, a pitiable sham, a too-apparent effort to cheat the years by appearances. The white dress she wears is too frilly, too youthful for her; so are the high-heeled pumps and clocked silk stockings. There is an absurd suggestion of rouge on her tight cheeks and thin lips, of penciled make-up about her eyes. The black of her hair is brazenly untruthful. Above all there is shown in her simpering, self-consciously coquettish manner*

that laughable—and at the same time irritating and disgusting—mockery of undignified age snatching greedily at the empty simulacra of youth. She resembles some passé stock actress of fifty made up for a heroine of twenty."

The pitiful Emma is gradually drawn into the snare set by the heartless doughboy, and deceived into believing that the youth is going to marry her. The steps by which Emma approaches the sweet discussion of sex are shown with such consummate skill that the ridiculous old woman becomes an almost tragic figure. All the repressions of a lifetime are in one brief moment brought to the surface. Notice how she approaches her discussion of the "forbidden" topic:

EMMA—(*Then suddenly, wagging an admonishing finger at him and hiding beneath a joking manner an undercurrent of uneasiness*). I was forgetting I got a bone to pick with you, young man! I heard them sayin' to the store that you'd been up to callin' on that Tilly Small evenin' before last.

BENNY—(*With a lady-killer's carelessness*). Aw, I was passin' by and she called me in, that's all.

EMMA—(*Frowning*). They said you had the piano goin' and was singin' and no end of high jinks.

BENNY—Aw, these small town boobs think you're raising hell if you're up after eleven.

EMMA—(*Excitedly*). I ain't blamin' you. But her—she ought to have better sense—at her age, too, when she's old enough to be your mother.

BENNY—Aw, say, she ain't half as old—(*Catching himself*). Oh, she's an old fool, you're right there, Emmer.

EMMA—(*Severely*). And I hope you know the kind of woman she is and has been since she was a girl.

BENNY—(*With a wink*). I wasn't born yesterday. I got her number long ago. I ain't in my cradle, get me! I'm in the army! Oui! (*Chuckles*) . . . These small town skirts don't hand me nothin'. (*With a grin.*) You forget I was in France—and after the dames over there these birds here look some punk.

EMMA—(*Sits down—wetting her lips*). And what—what are those French critters like?

BENNY—(*With a wink*). Oh, Boy! They're some pippins! It ain't so much that they're better lookin' as that they've got a way with 'em—lots of ways. (*He laughs with a lascivious smirk.*)

EMMA—(*Unconsciously hitches her chair nearer his. The turn the conversation has taken seems to have aroused a hectic, morbid intensity in her. She continues to wet her lips and pushes back her hair from her flushed face as if it were stifling her*). What do you mean, Benny? What kind of ways have they got—them French girls. . . . Tell me! Tell me all about 'em. You needn't be scared—to talk open with me. I ain't as strict as I seem—about hearin' things. Tell me! I've heard French girls was awful wicked.

Emma's disillusion is swift and cruel. In spite of what Caleb and her relatives tell her she clings to her absurd illusion. "Just because I'm a mite older'n him—," she tells Caleb, "can't them things happen jist as well as any other—what d'you suppose—can't I care for him same as any woman cares for a man? But I do! I care more'n I ever did for you!" It is Benny who deals the final blow: if his uncle buys him off, he will promise not to carry out his threat of marrying. "Say, honest, Aunt Emmer, you didn't believe—you didn't think I was really stuck on you, did you? Aw, say, how could I? Have a heart! Why, you're as old as ma is. Ain't you, Aunt Emmer? (*He adds ruthlessly.*) And I'll say you look it, too!"

The end of the play is needlessly violent. Caleb hangs himself, and the moment Emma learns of it she "moves like a sleepwalker toward the door," murmuring, "Wait, Caleb, I'm going down to the barn"—to put an end to herself.

MURDER AND SUICIDE

Murder and suicide must be sparingly used in the theater. Such violence loses its tragic

quality unless it is shown to be inevitable. It is an easy expedient for the playwright who doesn't know what else to do or, in the hands of a more conscientious artist, an equally facile way of bringing his plot to a full stop, emphasizing the tragic element in his story.

In *Diff'rent*, though O'Neill shows both Caleb and Emma driven to extremes, I am neither emotionally nor intellectually persuaded that they would commit suicide. There are many people who either dare not, or perhaps don't want to, kill themselves—even though they believe they have nothing more to live for—who go on living in quiet desperation. Caleb and Emma are like that. To kill them off at the end is an act of mercy, and O'Neill's mood here was anything but merciful: he is after truth. Notice that in *Desire Under the Elms*, where the tragedy is more bitter and the passion deeper, there is no suicide, though all three of the chief characters are even more clearly justified in killing themselves than Caleb and Emma are. They go on living. "Life doesn't end," says O'Neill. "One experience is but the birth of another. Violent death is seldom the solution of anything, in life or in fiction. It is too often a makeshift device. Do you remember Lessing's anecdote? A spectator

at a play asked his neighbor what a certain character died of. "Of the fifth act," was the reply, and Lessing adds that in "very truth the fifth act is an ugly disease that carries off many a one to whom the first four acts promised a longer life." *

THE QUEST FOR NEW FORMS

Reference has before been made to O'Neill's constant search for new forms in which to express the subtlest shades of meaning. Being in no sense a purveyor of theatrical commodities, he takes an artist's delight in facing new difficulties. An obstacle easily overcome is an obstacle scarcely worth attacking. But there is more to this than the joy of the craftsman. O'Neill is always striving to show his characters and develop his situations in the most emphatic manner possible, to dig down as deep into their souls as he can and to exhibit only what he really believes is important. There is no one way of doing this: "technique" for such a man is a

* Of the thirty-five O'Neill plays I have seen or read, there are only five in which there is no murder, death, suicide or insanity. In the others I find a total of six suicides and one unsuccessful attempt; ten important murders (not counting incidental episodes referred to in the text); nineteen deaths, nearly all due to violence; and six cases of insanity.

barren and meaningless bit of jargon. "If I thought there was only one way," he said two years ago, "I should be following the mechanistic creed—which is the very thing I condemn." Each new play brings into being its own specially articulated structure. Surface realism suffices for one set of characters, old-fashioned romance for another, and so on.

More than a decade ago several young Germans popularized a mechanical sort of technique known as "Expressionism." It is an outgrowth of certain devices employed by Strindberg and Wedekind, based to a certain extent on the philosophy of Nietzsche. "Expressionism" in the theater is a misleading term. It is not radically different from what most artists have used in one way or another from the earliest times.

"THE HAIRY APE"

Most critics call O'Neill an Expressionist, because *The Hairy Ape* and, in another way, *The Emperor Jones* resemble certain plays of Toller, Hasenclever, Kaiser and other so-called Expressionists. It is also asserted that he has been considerably influenced by the young Ger-

mans. I asked him what he knew about the recent dramatic developments in Middle Europe, and whether he had consciously made use of the methods of Kaiser and the rest.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

"The first Expressionistic play that I ever saw," he answered, "was Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, produced in New York in 1922, after I'd written both *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. I had read *From Morn to Midnight* before *The Hairy Ape* was written, but not before the idea for it was planned. The point is that *The Hairy Ape* is a direct descendant of *Jones*, written long before I had ever heard of Expressionism, and its form needs no explanation but this. As a matter of fact, I did not think much of *Morn to Midnight*, and still don't. It is too easy. It would not have influenced me." Whether he has read or heard about Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy I can't say, but *Dynamo* offers certain parallels to that remarkable work.

In a letter to Charles O'Brien Kennedy, who directed the revival of *The Moon of the Caribbees* at the Provincetown Playhouse,

O'Neill wrote in 1921: "Well, I'm hard at work at *The Hairy Ape*, and it is coming along in great shape. I've got the swing of it now, I think. Believe me, it's going to be strong stuff with a kick in each mit—and stuff done in a new way, along the lines of *Emperor Jones* in construction but even more so. You can tell Wolheim for me that the lead will be a bigger part than Brutus Jones. If I could go ahead without interruption, I think I'd have the whole thing completed—in long hand—by the first of the year. But, darn it, the chances are I'll have to go down to New York for a few days to see my mother and Jim. . . . But, whatever interrupts, I've got my strangle hold on the play now and the rest is only a question of how soon."

In order to prove to my own satisfaction that I was not inventing evidence after the fact, I recalled having written in 1922 that the three great influences affecting the plays of Young Germany were Nietzsche, Strindberg and Wedekind. To anyone who has read thus far it will be clear that Nietzsche, Strindberg and Wedekind—particularly the first two—have been among the most powerful influences over the young Eugene O'Neill. Like Hasenclever and the others, he too had felt the futility of

trying to express in the old forms the multifariousness of modern life, but unlike them, he based his work on human character—not the type or the abstraction. Yet *The Hairy Ape* is something of an exception. Instead of intensifying a particular man, he has symbolized him in the person of Yank.

> *The Hairy Ape*, he has said,[16] "was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven, he's in the middle, trying to make peace, taking the 'woist punches from bot' of 'em.' This idea was expressed in Yank's speech. The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play. Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to 'belonging' either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong.' "

An intellectual concept, you see, underlies *The Hairy Ape*, a philosophy growing not out of a single human situation but from certain

deductions made by the dramatist about life and society. The idea sprang, however, from a decidedly human situation:

> "I shouldn't have known the stokers if I hadn't happened to scrape an acquaintance with one of our own furnace room gang at Jimmy the Priest's. His name was Driscoll, and he was a Liverpool Irishman . . . the synonym for a tough customer . . . Driscoll . . . came to a strange end. He committed suicide by jumping overboard in mid-ocean. . . . Why? It was the why of Driscoll's suicide that gave me the germ of the idea. . . ." [17]

The idea was good, and the play is one of the most interesting of all O'Neill's works. It is a series of short scenes, beginning in the hold of the steamer where Yank then "belongs," and ending in the Zoo, where he is killed, and "at last belongs"—"perhaps."

The play holds you because of its tragic irony, its novelty, its underlying idea, its strange settings; your curiosity is aroused at the beginning, and is not fully satisfied even at the end. But in the last analysis it remains largely a philosophical and therefore an impersonal work. O'Neill at one time realized perfectly that a play lives by reason of its human appeal. In the article quoted on page 127 he says: "I personally do not believe that an idea can be

readily put over to an audience except through characters. When it sees 'A Man' and 'A Woman'—just abstractions, it loses the human contact by which it identifies itself with the protagonist of the play . . . the character of Yank remains a man and everyone recognizes him as such." He sees that there is no such thing as an abstract plot in life, and that only human beings can make one.

Yet I think O'Neill is mistaken in believing that Yank "remains a man." He has human attributes, but "he is a symbol." Is it possible to make a man and a symbol at the same time? A human being, like Hamlet, may symbolize certain qualities or characteristics or even sum up a whole philosophy, but when the dramatist deliberately uses a figure in order to make him typify man, or humanity, he necessarily minimizes the human elements in his story. At least I feel this is true in the case of Yank. He is supernatural, more or less an abstraction, an idea. Could it be otherwise, granted the dramatist's aim?

Still, he could hardly have employed the same direct and realistic methods that served him in *Diff'rent*. What he might have done it is not my intention to say, but I believe he could have made his points just as well by

keeping the whole play out of the realm of the supernatural. I have used the term supernaturalism, and in turning to O'Neill's note on Strindberg in a program of the Provincetown Playhouse, I find him speaking of it in a passage that explains his viewpoint in writing *The Hairy Ape*.

"SUPERNATURALISM"

> "Yet it is only by means of some form of 'supernaturalism' that we may express in the theater what we comprehend intuitively of that self-obsession which is the particular discount we moderns have to pay for the loan of life. The old 'naturalism' —or 'realism,' if you prefer (I would to God some genius were gigantic enough to define clearly the separateness of these terms once and for all!)— no longer applies. It represents our fathers' daring aspirations toward self-recognition by holding the family kodak up to ill-nature. But to us their old audacity is *blague*, we have taken too many snapshots of each other in every graceless position. We have endured too much from the banality of surfaces."

It is surely possible to write a play—even a supernatural play—about recognizably human beings and dispense entirely with the banality of surfaces, but you cannot very well have your

human beings serve these two purposes at the same time. Yank cannot symbolize man and his efforts to "belong," and yet remain a single individual. He might have been a man and still have embodied the dramatist's ideas; he might have been treated, like Ephraim in *Desire Under the Elms,* as a man from whose character we are allowed to draw deductions and make generalizations, but he is not so treated. It is for this reason that *The Hairy Ape,* for all its fascination, remains a rather cold bit of dramatized philosophy.

The Hairy Ape, The First Man and *The Fountain* were all written in 1921. A symbolic fantasy, half realistic and half grotesque, a realistic middle-class satire, and a romantic play —all from the pen of the "morbid" O'Neill, and in the same year!

"THE FIRST MAN"

What about *The First Man?* It has puzzled many, it was not a go on the stage, and it is generally regarded as one of O'Neill's least happy efforts. It is a most ambitious failure. The play presents the struggle of a high-minded scientist to live up to his ideals. He is

about to set forth on an expedition in search of the earliest traces of man, and has with the utmost difficulty arranged to have his wife accompany him on his five years' quest. Two years before they had lost their children under tragic circumstances and made up their minds not to have any more. Their lives are thenceforth devoted to Curtis Jayson's work.

As the play opens, however, the Jaysons are face to face with a problem that is to end in tragedy: Martha is going to have a baby. Curt is thunderstruck; his career and life-work are threatened, and the worst of it is that Martha seems happy. "Oh, Curt," she says, "I wish I could tell you what I feel, make you feel with me the longing for a child. If you had just the tiniest bit of feminine in you—! . . . But you're so utterly masculine, dear! That's what has made me love you, I suppose —so I've no right to complain of it . . . I don't. I wouldn't have you changed one bit! I love you. And I love the things you love—your work—because it's a part of you. And that's what I want you to do—to reciprocate—to love the creator in me—to desire that I, too, should complete myself with the thing nearest my heart!"

The dilemma is perhaps even too clearly

stated in this speech. Both Curt and Martha are intelligent; they understand each other and, except in this one case, each sympathizes with the other's point of view. Then comes the explanation:

"It's all my fault," says Martha, "I've spoiled you by giving up my life so completely to yours. You've forgotten I've one. Oh, I don't mean that I was a martyr. I know that in you alone lay my happiness in these years—after the children died. But we are no longer what we were then. We must, both of us, relearn to love and respect—what we have become."

He will not yet face the issue; but he does love her:

> MARTHA—(*In a whisper*). Yes, you love me. But who am I? You don't know.
>
> CURT—(*Frightfully*). Martha! Stop! This is terrible. (*They continue to be held by each other's fearfully questioning eyes.*)

And the curtain falls on the second act. The third is concerned with the birth of Martha's child, a scene as graphically suggested as though it were actually taking place on the stage. Curt's attitude has not changed: he hates the child that has ruined his work, and Martha has read that hatred in his eyes. That

is why Martha is suffering so long and so cruelly. "I was holding her hands," says Curt, "and her eyes searched mine with such a longing question in them—and she read only my hatred there, not my love for her." Then Martha dies, after giving birth to a boy. This drama is played to the accompaniment of the bickerings of several petty hypocritical relatives, and the sympathetic Richard Bigelow, friend and confidant of Curt and his wife. Curt's brothers, sisters, in-laws, and the rest—products of middle-class morality—furnish a complex bass for the main theme in their attempts to make a scandal by fixing the paternity of the child upon Bigelow. The suspicions of these people are so low and absurd that Curt has no notion of them until the play has almost ended. Up to the moment when the truth dawns on him, his relatives are only more or less disagreeable irritants. To make matters worse, Curt is so "hardened" in their eyes that he refuses to see the baby; a final "proof" that the child is not his. He then announces his intention of going away, but this is too much for the family:

ESTHER—Yes, you really must think of us, Curt.
CURT—But—I—you—how are you concerned? Pretense? You mean you want me to stay and

pretend—in order that you won't be disturbed by any silly tales they tell about me? (*With a wild laugh.*) Good God, this is too much! Why does a man have to be maddened by fools at such a time! (*Raging.*) Leave me alone! You're like a swarm of poisonous flies.

Then when he finally understands what they are driving at, he dashes up, sees the baby and returns to address the assembled family: ". . . I'll come back (*the light of an ideal beginning to shine in his eyes*). When he's old enough, I'll teach him to know and love a big, free life. Martha used to say that he would take her place in time. Martha shall live again for me and him."

The idea of the play is formulaic: a man whose dreams are ruined—or so he believes—pulled back to earth by the laws of life; at last given a new impetus. The never-ending aspirations of man. The undying hope of the individual and his ultimate identification with life through something larger than himself. It is the same in *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Fountain*, and *The Great God Brown*. But the method is different. There is far too much discussion of abstract ideas: O'Neill will not allow his people to be, they must constantly talk over the why and wherefore.

The Fountain was entirely rewritten and the first act of *Welded* composed in 1922.

"WELDED" AND THE PROBLEM OF MARRIAGE

Welded is the first mentioned for 1923. This is the most compact, the most deliberately and exclusively intellectual of all the plays. It is a work of hard surfaces; the study of a man and woman hopelessly linked together by bonds of passion. The theme is a favorite with the French dramatists. Hervieu's *Les Tenailles* and Porto-Riche's *Amoureuse* are the best examples of the type.

A sensitive man and his equally sensitive wife are tortured on the one hand by their love for each other, and on the other by that curiously perverse but almost universal passion for self-torture. Michael Cape has the "forehead of a thinker, the eyes of a dreamer, the nose and mouth of a sensualist." Eleanor's face is "dominated by passionate, blue-gray eyes. . . . The first impression of her whole personality is one of charm partly innate, partly imposed by years of self-discipline."

Says the woman: "Our ideal was difficult.

(*Sadly.*) Sometimes I think we've demanded too much. Now there's nothing left but that something which can't give itself. And I blame you for this—because I can neither take more nor give more—and you blame me (*She smiles tenderly.*) and then we fight!"

Their life together is a rhythmical ebb and flow of love and war. The play begins to move on the eve of battle. The excuse—for something must start the trouble—is jealousy: Michael is jealous of Eleanor's supposed affection for John, which began years before their marriage. He cannot remain satisfied with things as they are: he is a sensitive artist, analyzing himself and his relations with his wife, while she is jealous of his work.

The situation tightens as each threatens to do anything to kill his love for the other. He goes out, and Eleanor cries after him: "Go! Go! I'm glad! I hate you. I'll go too! I'm free! I'll go—!"

The second act has two scenes. The first is in John's house. Eleanor arrives, and throws herself into her friend's arms, but she is unable to carry out her intentions. There is something in her heart which cannot be killed. "My love for him is my own, not his! That he can never possess!" And she returns home.

The second scene is the shabby bedroom of a prostitute. Michael has come there with the first woman he has picked up. But he is no more able to carry out his intention than Eleanor was. "I can't!" he tells the woman. "I can't. I'm the weaker. Our love must live on in me. There's no death for it. There's no freedom—while I live."

The last act is in the Capes' home again. Eleanor and Michael "smile with a queer understanding. They act for the moment like two persons of different races, deeply in love but separated by a barrier of language." They realize that they are "welded," indissolubly linked together. It's a fact which they both face, and in facing it sincerely they are given a glimmer of hope. "They stare into each other's eyes. It is as if now by a sudden flash from within they recognized themselves, shorn of all the ideas, attitudes, cheating gestures which constitute the vanity of personality. Everything, for this second, becomes simple for them—serenely unquestionable. It becomes impossible that they should ever deny life, through each other, again."

They are strong, and they can live again, "But we'll hate," says Michael, while Eleanor echoes, "Yes!"

CAPE—And we'll torture and tear, and clutch for each other's souls,—fight—fail and hate again —(*He raises his voice in aggressive triumph.*)— but—fail with pride—with joy!"

Shortly after the play closed I asked O'Neill what the trouble was. "The actors," he answered, "did about as well as they could, but the whole point of the play was lost. The most significant thing in the last act was the silences between the speeches. What was actually spoken should have served to a great extent just to punctuate the meaningful pauses. The actors didn't get that."

The stage-directions show what the dramatist is driving at, but no dramatist can afford to leave too much to any actor: the actor is—he must be—the more or less inspired servant of the author, and it is the author's business to give him the necessary lines to speak or business to act. Michael tells Eleanor he wants so much to say what he feels, but can "only stutter like an idiot!" It was O'Neill's problem to make the idiotic stutterings of his character express something that mattered. That is the function of dialogue. This last act is too meager, for too much is suggested in the directions, which are a commentary rather than a guide, and too little in the dialogue. It

is rather a large order to ask any actor and actress to reveal, without words, the fact for instance that it "becomes impossible that they should ever deny life, through each other, again."

What is true of the last act applies with almost equal force to the others. The play is not intended as surface realism: it is an attempt to strip away all the encumbering non-essentials, to reveal directly two naked souls at war with each other. The plot is as direct and impersonal as a steel machine, the language as analytically summarized as a psychologist's. It looks as though the playwright had become more interested in speculating on the theory of marriage than in the men and women who marry.

Reducing his characters to pale shadows of human beings and allowing little space for the development of human traits, O'Neill makes his play less a spectacle of life than a philosophical disquisition. His theme required, I think, a far different sort of treatment. Remember, his man and his woman are bound together by a physical as well as a spiritual bond. Now physical love, heaven knows, makes a legitimate and forgivably human appeal in drama, and I see no reason why O'Neill

relegated this element not to the background, but completely out of the frame. I have no doubt he felt like Michael, who wanted "to say so much what" he felt, but could "only stutter like an idiot."

What the audience missed in *Welded* was precisely what I miss in the printed text—the breath of life. I seek men and women and find only a pair of animated abstractions. I know what O'Neill intends but he gives me only arguments, explanations, and reiterated statements. I am always conscious of the steel grip of the manipulator. In the theater I want to give myself up entirely to the matter in hand, allowing my emotions free play. It is the dramatist's business so to move—not to persuade or convince or bully—me that I shall know and therefore understand something about human beings and life that I had not known before or something I had only half-felt or perceived. I don't want to admire his logic (at least not until afterward), and as for the technical means that enabled him to achieve the results aimed at, I would have it seem that these never existed.

Welded is a finely conceived but over-intellectualized study, not a well-rounded three-dimensional drama about human beings. It is

the skeleton of a possibly fine play. The dramatist was to return later—with too many ideas—to some of the same problems in the extraordinary *Strange Interlude.*

"ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS"

It was no wonder that *All God's Chillun Got Wings* should stir up trouble. I am inclined to believe that no American dramatist, except perhaps O'Neill (and Paul Green), is sufficiently detached to be able to regard intermarriage between whites and blacks in a purely dispassionate mood.

But I think that O'Neill took his situation from life as he found it because it happened to give him a chance to develop a theme that appealed to him. He was not aroused primarily by the sociological problem of the American negro any more than Shakespeare was concerned over the civic implications of the quarrel of the Capulets and the Montagues. In each case a playwright hit on a situation that was full of dramatic possibilities. It is a fact that the marriage of a negro and a white, at present in the United States, arouses hatred and prejudice, and between the contracting

parties is almost always sure of precipitating a struggle. But essentially *All God's Chillun* is a drama of love and passion. Isn't that enough? There are overtones and suggestions of race memory and fear and hatred, but these are only the accompaniment of the drama. The play is as warmly human as *Welded* is abstract.

The opening scenes show in a seemingly casual way the quite unconscious friendship of black and white children. One of these, an earnest young negro, has ambitions; he strives to pass his law examinations and makes heroic efforts to overcome what he knows are his racial limitations. He marries a white girl, and for a time the two are happy; but before long they are beset by the problems which generations of blacks and whites have made for themselves. The girl goes crazy and tries to kill her husband, who embodies for her an innate and unreasoning fear of the negro. But she recovers, and asks forgiveness:

JIM—I wasn't scared of being killed. I was scared of what they'd do to you after.

ELLA—(*After a pause—like a child*). Will God forgive me, Jim?

JIM—Maybe He can forgive what you've done to me; and maybe He can forgive what I've done to you; but I don't see how He's going to forgive—Himself.

Here is the lowest point to which the tragedy of this man and woman descends; but it cannot rest there. Tragedy at its best extends beyond itself when the sufferer is enabled to catch a glimpse of something besides the immediate tragic catastrophe. Though Jim is a "failure," there is in Ella the spark of hope, the symbol of redemption, and just before the play closes he "throws himself on his knees and raises his shining eyes, his transfigured face":

> JIM—Forgive me, God—and make me worthy! Now I hear your Voice! . . . Forgive me, God, for blaspheming You! Let this fire of burning suffering purify me of selfishness and make me worthy of the child you send me for the woman you take away!
>
> ELLA—Don't cry, Jim! You mustn't cry! I've got only a little time left and I want to play. Don't be old Uncle Jim now. Be my little boy, Jim. Pretend you're Painty Face and I'm Jim Crow. Come and play!
>
> JIM—Honey, Honey, I'll play right up to the gates of Heaven with you!

As a "practical" dramatist O'Neill's error was in making his "nigger" a human being. He even forgot the susceptibilities of those good Americans who have laid down the law as to how far a negro may go in his relations with whites, but recognize no law as to how

far a white may go with a negro. He used a situation so poignant and so tragically beautiful that few otherwise competent critics could see in it a work of art.*

* Here, as a matter of record, is a letter O'Neill wrote to a Princeton classmate, printed in *The Fifteen Year Record* of the class of 1910:

"Any appreciation of the worth of that play is doubly appreciated by me, because of all the prejudiced and unjust knocks it received when it was enjoying such a storm of unwelcome notoriety last winter. It seemed for a time there as if all the feeble-witted both in and out of the K.K.K. were hurling newspaper bricks in my direction—not to speak of the anonymous letters which ranged from those of infuriated Irish Catholics who threatened to pull my ears off as a disgrace to their race and religion, to those of equally infuriated Nordic Kluxers who knew that I had negro blood, or else was a Jewish pervert masquerading under a Christian name in order to do subversive propaganda for the Pope! This sounds like a burlesque but the letters were more so. And then when the play opened nothing at all happened, not even a senile egg. It was a dreadful anticlimax for all concerned, particularly the critics who seemed to feel cheated that there hadn't been at least one murder that first night. And so on ever since. The whole affair was really a most ludicrous episode—not so ludicrous for me, however, since it put the whole theme of the play on a false basis and thereby threw my whole intent in the production into the discard."

The police, on a technicality, tried to stop the play on the very evening of the opening, by not permitting the children to act in the first scene. But this was read to the audience, and the play went on smoothly. This enraged the police authorities, who not long after stirred up trouble for *Desire Under the Elms.*

A NEW NOTE IN TRAGEDY— "DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS"

Desire Under the Elms, written in 1924, marks the highest point so far in O'Neill's development as a tragic writer—the highest point of achievement, but not of aim. In this play he has sounded the depths. He faces life with courage and sanity.

Read what he so admirably stated two years before the play was acted.[18]

> "Sure I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that—and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot—I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written. It's mere present-day judgment to think of tragedy as unhappy! The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. Through it they found release from the petty considerations of everyday existence. They saw their lives ennobled by it. A work of art is always happy; all else is unhappy. . . . I don't love life because it's pretty. Pretti-

ness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness."

I called O'Neill an optimist before I had read these words, and by that I meant that he was a militant apostle of Life with a capital L. He dares look upon it without passing judgment; he lays it bare to the best of his ability as an artist and poet.

In *Desire* he has shown a group of peasants, tenacious in their passion for land, for justifying their hardness by their fear of the wrath of God, for power, for beauty of a kind, and for sexual gratification. These people—unlike people in everyday life!—are cruel and greedy; they talk freely of shameful things fit only to be printed in the Bible. Ephraim, his sons and his wife are strange composites of good and evil; "vice" followed at once with swift punishment: a woman seduces her step-son, and both parties to the crime actually exult in their passion!

"DESIRE" AND THE CENSORS

Desire Under the Elms ran a year in New York, and two road companies have been doing

fairly good business with it.* Early in its career at the Greenwich Village Theater a New York City official, Joab Banton, tried his best to close it. He was opposed by a number of persons who believed at least in O'Neill's sincerity, and a play jury system was put into operation to inquire into the morals of such shocking productions as *Desire Under the Elms, They Knew What They Wanted, What Price Glory?*, and *Processional*. The jury could find nothing very subversive in any of them, even in the O'Neill play, which was denounced as the most dangerous. But the harm had been done: Mr. Banton had advertised the play to the general public and for almost a year large audiences went to see it for the smut they believed must be there, and because of this, the play sounded strangely off-key. A popular and miscellaneous audience in an uptown theater, composed mostly of persons who were expecting something spicy, could hardly fail to make any actor nervous and self-conscious.

* When news came from Los Angeles that a company playing *Desire* had been arrested by the city authorities, O'Neill's only remark was a vague question: "Isn't Los Angeles the place where the motion pictures are made?" The play was finally given a clean bill of health and played to enormous houses. It was stopped in Boston, and is still, I think, banned by the Censor in London.

I am surprised that no one brought suit against the management, for so far as I have been able to learn, most of the people who saw the play were disappointed. They were resentful, too, at being forced to witness a powerful and beautiful work, which was about as suggestive as a funeral. I think what they were most offended by was the quotation from the *Song of Solomon.* In one instance, a pious churchgoer told me that the Bible ought never to be quoted in a play, because—as in *Desire*—its words became dangerously attractive. He had never realized that the Canticle was love poetry.

I saw *Desire Under the Elms* shortly after it opened. No play of O'Neill's has ever moved me as profoundly as this one. If ever that disputed passage about Katharsis meant anything it means it here, for *Desire* purges the soul, sears, tortures, twists it, and exalts it in the end. O'Neill has built a shining edifice, an epic drama of the workers of the soil, with ingredients ugly and beautiful, and as essentially true as he ever saw them.

Ephraim Cabot, a New England farmer who believes that "God is hard" and bases his life on that principle, has just married his third wife, Abbie Putnam, an attractive woman of thirty-five, just half his own age. She marries

in order to secure a home for herself. She finds awaiting her young Eben, Ephraim's thirty-two-year-old son by his second wife. Believing that the farm belongs to him, Eben looks upon his new stepmother as a designing and dangerous interloper, and he hates her with all the venom of a true son of Ephraim Cabot. Abbie is both clever and sexually attractive and in order to keep the farm in her possession she tells her husband that she believes she could still have a child by him. The old man is delighted and promises that if she should so bless him he will make over his property to the new heir. Abbie then proceeds cold-bloodedly to seduce Eben, but during the process she falls desperately in love with him, as he does with her. A son is born to them, but Ephraim believes it is his own. Abbie, for all her cleverness, has aroused in her heart a passion which wrecks all her plans: the lies necessary for carrying out her plot can no longer be concealed, and Eben tells everything to his father. Ephraim then destroys the last vestige of Eben's illusion by telling him what was, not long since, the literal truth: that Abbie has pretended to love him only in order to make sure of the property. The young man, in a fury of rage and disappointment, decides to leave home at

once, to Abbie's utter despair. The irony of the situation is not clear to her; she is so deeply attached to Eben that she cannot convince him that while in the beginning she did make love to him for an ulterior purpose, she is now completely mastered by her passion. She frantically tells him that she loves him for his own sake, but he will not listen. She must prove at any cost that she is finally sincere. She therefore strangles the child. Eben is convinced of her love for him, but he is so horrified that he runs off at once and tells the police.

The last scene finds the lovers once more united and in each other's arms. Eben confesses that he is an accomplice and he is ready to pay the penalty with Abbie. They are taken off by the sheriff and his men, happy and exultant in their complete absorption of one another. They have drunk deep of the draught of life and passion, and they have no regrets. They have passed out of the realm where tragedy—as it is ordinarily understood—can touch them. Of "sin" they have no consciousness: victims of Puritanical repressions, of unrestrained passion and of the mighty current of life, they have fashioned their romance apart from the sordidness of their surroundings, though they have lived among those whose re-

ligion is hateful, they have broken through into the light of day. There among the rocks and the hard soil where they yearned for beauty, they have at last found it.

The framework of this tragedy is rather elaborate; two almost superfluous scenes are introduced at first in order to show Eben's older half-brothers leaving the farm for California (the time is 1850), and several scenes are devoted to an elaboration of the character of Ephraim. But the unity of the play lies rather in the character of Abbie. In arousing the repressed passion of Eben she has forgotten, or perhaps never known, that the sex instinct cannot easily be controlled; she has depended on her own craftiness to see her machinations through in cold blood to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap.

It is in the scenes where Abbie begins to realize that she has precipitated a tremendous power that she can't cope with that O'Neill proves himself a master. There is no trace of "theater": a trick would spoil everything. He must push on relentlessly to his conclusion. What does Abbie do? She cannot give Eben up, and she cannot remain with Ephraim. She has to show, by violent means, that she cares nothing for the property. One thing stands

between them: the child. She therefore kills him.

Now I do not believe that Abbie would deliberately murder her baby. I believe she would have killed Ephraim, and I think that that is what she ought to have done in the play. But the point cannot be decided by reference to any canon of criticism—no point of any importance can.

The murder is not convincing. I think it is a mistake, yet it does not seriously affect the play. The rest follows inevitably: as in *All God's Chillun*, the dawn breaks on the figures of a man and a woman calmly facing whatever the day shall bring them. "Life doesn't end. One experience is but the birth of another." Even death itself.

TRANSITION EXPERIMENTS AND "THE FOUNTAIN"

The Fountain was written in 1921. It was bought first by Arthur Hopkins, then by the Theater Guild, and at last produced by Jones, Macgowan and O'Neill at the Greenwich Village Theater in 1925. It ran there for just two weeks and was pretty generally condemned

by the press and the few audiences that went to see it. On the whole, the play seemed rather dull, which was to a certain extent the fault of our American system of long waits between the scenes; partly the fault of the actors, most of whom were untrained in romantic acting; and partly that of the playwright. This play, as conventional in form as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, came as a surprise to nearly everyone who knew the work of O'Neill. But actually it shows only another aspect of his outlook on life. It is concerned with the almost wholly imaginary story of the quest of the Fountain of Youth by Juan Ponce de Leon and his ultimate realization that such ventures are and must be doomed to failure when rationally or materialistically conceived, though they become glorious events when identified with the quest for life, love and beauty. "One must accept," says Juan, "absorb, give back, become oneself a symbol. . . . Juan Ponce de Leon is past! He is resolved into the thousand moods of beauty that make up happiness—color of that sunset, of tomorrow's dawn, breath of the great Trade Wind—sunlight on the grass, an insect's song, the rustle of leaves, an ant's ambitions. I shall know eternal becoming—eternal youth!"

The chant that runs through the play is a lyrical comment on the theme:

> Love is a flower
> Forever blooming,
> Beauty a fountain
> Forever flowing
> Upward into the source of sunshine,
> Upward into the azure heaven;
> One with God but
> Ever returning
> To kiss the earth that the flower may live.

As poetry these lines are not distinguished, but when chanted in a theater they help to establish a poetic mood.

The Fountain is, in conception, a dramatic poem of exaltation—the reflection of the poet's never-ending aspiration toward life, love and beauty.

Juan seeks the actual Fountain of Youth and his life is dedicated to the lifelong task of finding it; unscrupulous and cruel, he follows a rainbow until the pursuit becomes a form of mania. Yet no dreamer finds what he sets out to attain, though some are rewarded in discovering something else and abandoning as worthless what they once desired. Through tragedy they learn the lesson of life, divining at last that the effort is worth while in itself. Juan

cannot become young again, but he does learn that "there is no gold but love."

O'Neill's note on the program is instructive and amusing. The last sentence is a fair answer to those who declare the man lacking in a sense of humor. As if he had even been a morbid realist!

"The idea," he says, "of writing *The Fountain* came on finally from my interest in the recurrence in folklore of the beautiful legend of a healing spring of eternal youth. The play is only incidentally concerned with the Era of Discovery in America. It has sought merely to express the urging spirit of that period without pretending to any too educational accuracy in the matter of dates and facts in general. The characters, with the exception of Columbus, are fictitious. Juan Ponce de Leon, in so far as I've been able to make him a human being, is wholly imaginary. I have simply filled in the bare outline of his career, as briefly reported in the Who's Who of the histories, with a conception of what could have been the truth behind his 'life-sketch' if he had been the man it was romantically—and religiously—moving to me to believe he might have been! Therefore, I wish to take solemn oath right here and now that *The Fountain* is not morbid realism."

In spite of its conception and in spite of the beauty of certain scenes, *The Fountain* is not a very spontaneous work. I feel that O'Neill has adopted a form not altogether in harmony with his temperament. He knows the form, but I suspect he disdains it as over-facile. Yet he went to great pains to do the job as neatly as possible. To be wholly successful, a play of this type must be written naïvely, with more passion than reflection: and it must master the poet. The trouble here is that the poet knew the form so well that he mastered it. Then there is the matter of language. There are scenes toward the end that cry aloud not for fine writing or mere literature but for poetry. I mean formal verse. The poetic urge, the heat of the poet's passion, seems striving to burst the bonds of prose, demanding the formal freedom of inspired verse. And no matter how hard he may try, O'Neill is not yet a master of felicitous language. There is something labored in his purple patches. J. Brooks Atkinson, in the *Times* of Dec. 20, 1925, hit the nail on the head when he wrote that the play "rarely stirs the emotions or gives spur to the imagination. . . . The austere self-criticism that prompted Mr. O'Neill to destroy sixteen of his dramas

as unworthy of production has in this instance indulged him too freely."

"THE ANCIENT MARINER"

The Ancient Mariner, "a Dramatic Arrangement of Coleridge's Poem," was produced in 1924 at the Provincetown Playhouse. Here for the first time O'Neill uses the mask. In the Provincetown Playbill James Light, one of the producers, writes: "We are using masks in *The Ancient Mariner* for this reason: that we wish to project certain dramatic motifs through that spiritual atmosphere which the mask peculiarly gives. . . . We are trying to use it to show the eyes of tragedy and the face of exaltation."

In O'Neill's next play the mask becomes an important technical factor.

SYMBOLISM AND "THE GREAT GOD BROWN"

The Great God Brown, written in 1925, was produced (partly at the author's own expense, after Otto Kahn had declined to back it) at the Greenwich Village Theater in January, 1926. This play, so far as its conception is con-

cerned, is one of the most subtly beautiful things O'Neill has ever written. In it he has striven to tell, in a vibrant lyrical style, of man's aspirations; it is a dramatic pæan to man's struggle to identify himself with nature. The tone throughout is mystically ecstatic. As in all his mature plays, man's way is seen passing through the vale of tragedy, but it emerges triumphant.

In order to dispense with a certain amount of otherwise necessary explanation the dramatist has devised masks for nearly all his characters. "So far as I know," says Kenneth Macgowan in the program notes, "O'Neill's play is the first in which masks have ever been used to dramatize changes and conflicts in character." He uses them as a "means of dramatizing a transfer of personality from one man to another."

The Great God Brown requires explanation, and this the author himself furnished in a letter to the papers. I reprint all of it here:

> I realize that when a playwright takes to explaining he thereby automatically places himself "in the dock." But where an open-faced avowal by the play itself of the abstract theme underlying it is made impossible by the very nature of that hidden theme, then perhaps it is justifiable for the

author to confess the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in *The Great God Brown*, dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.

I had hoped the names chosen for my people would give a strong hint of this. (An old scheme, admitted—Shakespeare and multitudes since.) Dion Anthony—Dionysus and St. Anthony—the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony—the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion—creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even Godhead itself. (In the play it is Cybele, the pagan Earth Mother, who makes the assertion with authority: "Our Father, Who Art!" to the dying Brown, as it is she who tries to inspire Dion Anthony with her certainty in life for its own sake.)

Margaret is my image of the modern direct descendant of the Marguerite of Faust—the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race.

Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws, but patronized by her segregators, who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws.

Brown is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth—a Success—building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial preordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire.

Dion's mask of Pan which he puts on as a boy is not only a defense against the world for the supersensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist. The world is not only blind to the man beneath, but it also sneers at and condemns the Pan-mask it sees. After that Dion's inner self retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles. It is as Mephistopheles he falls stricken at Brown's feet after having condemned Brown to destruction by willing him his mask, but, this mask falling off as he dies, it is the Saint who kisses Brown's feet in abject contrition and pleads as a little boy to a big brother to tell him a prayer.

Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion—what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while in reality he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. This devil of mocking doubt makes short work of him. It enters him, rending him apart, torturing and transfiguring him until he is even forced to wear a mask of his Success, William A. Brown, before the

world, as well as Dion's mask toward wife and children. Thus Billy Brown becomes not himself to anyone. And thus he partakes of Dion's anguish—more poignantly, for Dion has the Mother, Cybele—and in the end out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's, begging for belief, and at the last finding it on the lips of Cybel.

And now for an explanation regarding this explanation. It was far from my idea in writing *Brown* that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of Man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings, Dion, Brown, Margaret and Cybel. I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves, forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it. It is Mystery—the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event—or accident—in any life on earth. And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theater. The solution, if there ever be any, will probably have to be produced in a test tube and turn out to be discouragingly undramatic.

I'm afraid this explanation calls for further explanation, and I think I have it, almost verbatim from the dramatist himself. Before the play was put on he asked what chance I thought

it had in the theater, and I said I would give it about two weeks, long enough for the O'Neill fans to take a look at it.

"You may be right," he answered, "but I somehow feel there's enough in it to get over to unsophisticated audiences. In one sense *Brown* is a mystery play, only instead of dealing with crooks and police it's about the mystery of personality and life. I shouldn't be surprised if it interested people who won't bother too much over every shade of meaning, but follow it as they follow any story. They needn't understand with their minds, they can just watch and feel."

And O'Neill was right, for the play ran nearly a year.

I don't know whether O'Neill has heard the story about the two shop-girls who went to see it when it moved up-town? It shows the attitude of most of the audiences who continued to patronize it during its long run. After the third act one of them turned to the other. "Gee, it's awful artistic, ain't it?", she said. "Yes," was the answer, "but it's good all the same."

The Great God Brown, as I have said, is one of the subtlest of all O'Neill's plays; beyond a doubt it is fuller than any other of the poet's sense of the rhythm and harmony and multi-

plicity of life. The language expresses—and where it doesn't express it hints at—shades of half-realized meanings that are difficult to shape into phrases and sentences, but on the whole the style is better fitted to the subject than in any other of the later plays except *Strange Interlude.*

Yet it is not as perfect technically as *Desire Under the Elms* or even as *The Hairy Ape:* it aims too high, it puts a burden upon the director and the actor that neither has successfully borne. I believe that in the theater all but the play itself should be no more than a humble adjunct to the dramatic poet, and that no production can illuminate or clarify the inner significance of any imaginative work, though it may add other elements, perhaps even a surpassing beauty quite apart from what is in the text itself. Though *The Great God Brown* was directed and played with skill and understanding, there was too much self-consciousness and "pointing." To produce a play of this sort we must have simplicity of mind and an extreme plasticity of emotion, in order that the purely theatrical qualities of the show, as a show, shall stand out above every shade of individual interpretation on the part of actor or director. I feel that the director and players

were too familiar with the author's intentions, instead of playing the thing straight ahead and leaving to O'Neill the task of putting these intentions across.

"MARCO MILLIONS"

In March, 1925, O'Neill finished work on *Marco Millions*. But he had been busy with it for a long time before. I am told that the idea came to him before he began writing *The Fountain*, in 1921. It had evidently been two plays, or one play in two parts not long before the final script was ready, intended for production on successive evenings, for in a letter he says that he decided to "rewrite and condense the two nights into one long night." The play had been bought some time before March, 1925, by David Belasco, but after a year's delay Belasco hesitated to produce it, alleging that it would cost too much money, and the script went the rounds again. Gilbert Miller and Arthur Hopkins both turned it down, and O'Neill suggested to Nathan, who was trying to interest managers, that Ames, Dillingham, Gest and Walter Hampden might want to see it. Ames seems to have read the play and refused it, and there

was talk later of Horace Liveright's raising the necessary money. In September, 1926, O'Neill wrote Nathan that the Theater Guild's committee "has definitely decided they want the play—but they could not do it for over a year."

Contracts were at last signed with the Guild, though *Marco* was not produced until 1928.

In 1926 I had read the script. Though it was the condensed version I saw, it was longer by at least two scenes than the version that was acted. I had gone through it quickly and in returning it to O'Neill I told him I thought it was a gorgeous and beautiful comedy. And so it was, but in reading it rapidly I had not calculated that what could be read in two minutes might, because of the elaborate stage-business described in the text, require five in the acting.

As to the origin of *Marco,* we know that the idea was in O'Neill's mind for years, but what may have put the sting into its bitterest scenes is an incident reported by George Nathan in *The American Mercury* in 1927:

> "When Mr. [Otto] Kahn turned his haughty critical shoulder upon this play [the *Great God Brown*] he asked O'Neill why he didn't give up writing such things and turn his hand instead to

> something which he, Kahn, might be proud to endorse. And what was this something?, O'Neill timidly wished to know. A play apotheosizing American big business and the American business man—a man like Mr. Kahn, for example, came the reply. O'Neill coughed and bowed himself from the great presence. His answer was to write *Marco Millions*, the sourest and most magnificent poke in the jaw that American big business and the American business man have ever got."

To this O'Neill added, when I saw him a year before Nathan wrote his squib, that Kahn had offered to let him in at a private directors' meeting in Wall Street. "A lot I'd have learned there!", he snorted. "Can you imagine those fellows exposing their big schemes in the presence of a suspicious-looking outsider?"

In all fairness to Mr. Kahn I must say that it did not seem to be his idea that O'Neill should glorify Big Business, but only write about it, and perhaps satirize it. Maybe I am mistaken, though. I can't imagine that Kahn would be so stupid as to invite O'Neill, of all men, to apotheosize Business; but on the other hand if he was, that would account for his seeing nothing in *The Great God Brown* and *Marco Millions*.

O'Neill's Foreword to *Marco* is worth looking at:

"This play," he writes, "is an attempt to render poetic justice to one long famous as a traveler, unjustly world-renowned as a liar, but sadly unrecognized by posterity in his true eminence as a man and a citizen—Marco Polo of Venice. The failure to appraise Polo at a fair valuation is his own fault. He dictated the book of his travels but left the traveler out. He was no author. He stuck to a recital of what he considered facts and the world called him a liar for his pains. Even in his native Venice he was scoffingly nicknamed 'the millionaire,' or 'Marco Millions.' They could not take seriously his impressive statistics about the 'millions' of this and the 'millions' of that in the East. Polo, the man of brass tacks, became celebrated as an extravagant romancer and ever since has traveled down the prejudiced centuries, a prophet without honor, or even notoriety, save in false whiskers. This has moved me to an indignant crusade between the lines of his book, the bars of his prison, in order to whitewash the good soul of that maligned Venetian."

Marco Millions is one of the less ambitious works of our playwright. I make this statement after some reflection, a re-reading of the text, and watching a beautiful production of it by the Theater Guild. My first enthusiasm was genuine, but at that time I romped through it and felt its crowded effects without having to hear and see each point as it was emphasized and reiterated.

The play is a romantic satire on Occidental hard-headedness set against a colorful background of medieval Oriental civilization. In ten scenes Marco Polo is shown pursuing his career from boyhood to early middle age and finally to Success. He begins as a nice young man and ends up a Babbitt, minus Babbitt's idealism. The beauty and romance, the serenity and scepticism of an age-old civilization, have no effect whatever upon him.

Here is a brilliant though not new idea for a delightful comedy, but the idea alone is not enough to fill so many scenes and a long evening in the playhouse.

The Guild did nobly by *Marco Millions*. The settings and costumes were entrancing. Of one thing only I must complain: the waits between scenes. Considering the amount of labor involved, the Guild did as much as could be done without a revolving-stage or "wagons." But why not the revolving-stage? American managers tell me the thing is not practical, but I know it is, and I know too that only by linking together by some such device the many scenes of a play like *Marco* is it possible to create the proper effect. The only satisfactory performance of *Macbeth* I ever saw lasted less than two hours; the curtain fell only once, to give

the audience time to drink beer and munch sandwiches. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, like *Marco Millions* and *Juarez and Maximilian*, are divided into several scenes not for the convenience of the audience, but because the dramatist in each case wished to produce certain effects. When a producer gives the audience a total of thirty or forty minutes' intermissions in a play that needs less than two hours in the playing, he is doing his best to break down what the playwright has carefully built up. Stretched out to two and a half hours *Marco* seems rather thin. I believe that if it had been reduced to five or six scenes, acted on a revolving stage without intermission and turned into a dramatic ballet with dancing, music (by someone like Korngold), pantomime and spoken dialogue, as in *The Mikado*, it would have been a perfect thing of its kind. O'Neill had too much to say about what needed only a few rapid scenes.

Here again I must repeat that in his later plays the dramatist shows a growing tendency to write "fine" speeches and work in purple patches. *The Fountain* had many of them, and *The Great God Brown* a few. I am not here referring to the dialogue in general, but to the rhetorical effusions of Ponce de Leon

and Kublai and Dion. I can't rid myself of the impression that O'Neill is striving for his effects. His gift for poetry lies not in written speeches, but in his conceptions, in scenes and situations, and occasionally in separate lines that illuminate not by their intrinsic verbal values, but by their implications.

And all the plays from *Marco* on are marred by touches of the Apocalyptic manner. I wish O'Neill would forget for a time the Books of Revelations and Jeremiah.

"STRANGE INTERLUDE"

When I last saw O'Neill in June, 1926, he told me about the new play he was writing. The idea sounded preposterous: there were to be nine acts, and all the characters were to speak their thoughts aloud, apparently with no regard for the ordinary conventions of the theater or of social intercourse.

"And why not?" he said. "Everything is a matter of convention. If we accept one, why not another, so long as it does what it's intended to do? My people speak aloud what they think and what the others aren't supposed to hear.

They speak in prose, realistic or otherwise—blank verse or hexameter or rhymed couplets." Then he outlined the story.

It was not long after that the Theater Guild contracted for *Strange Interlude*, and early in 1928 it opened at the John Golden Theater. The Guild people have a way of doing things well, even if it does take them some time to decide on a course of action. We know from the published letters of O'Neill that the Guild had turned down *The Fountain* when the prestige of a Guild production would have helped immensely and the royalties have eked out an income that was none too large; and there had been misunderstandings about other early MSS. But to the Guild O'Neill owes at least three superb productions, and it is likely that if that organization had not produced *Strange Interlude* and *Dynamo* he would have had a hard time finding other producers willing or able to take chances on them.

Let me begin my remarks on *Strange Interlude* by saying that the producers and director have spared no pains or expense in doing ample justice to the drama. There have been precious few plays that required more tact and skill and a finer imagination than this ambitious and subtle play in nine acts. Philip Moeller never

directed anything that required greater intelligence and a more sympathetic understanding than *Strange Interlude*. He brought into relief as much as was possible in a work that has so little that is theatrically conventional. You always know just what the players are doing; they interpret without appearing to do so. There is little of that "pointing," straining after effect, that has sometimes marred other Guild productions.

What is this much-discussed *Strange Interlude?* It is many things, almost as many things as it has been called. The first point to make is that from 5:30 P.M. until after eleven, except for eighty minutes' intermission for supper, it holds the audience. Yet not primarily by means of any theatrical trickery. It is not the story, which could easily have been condensed into three acts; it is not the strangeness of the asides and monologues (that novelty wears off in five minutes); it is no more nor less than the triumph of O'Neill's art, his amazing gift for understanding and laying bare some of the complexities of the human mind and heart. He was clearly unwilling to make use of the conventional dramatic form which, in its latest manifestations, does not admit the aside and the soliloquy, and refuses to allow

the dramatist much more than two or two and a half hours' time.

He had therefore, with a characteristic disregard of current fashions, elaborated what would otherwise have been a conventional plot into nine acts, with a total playing time almost twice as long as what we are accustomed to. There is more to hold the attention in *Strange Interlude* than there is in *Parsifal.* There is considerably less literature but far more drama than there is in *Faust. Strange Interlude* carries four characters through their chief spiritual crises during some twenty-seven or -eight years. Nina Leeds, daughter of a college professor, loses her fiancé shortly after he goes away to be an aviator. Her puritanical father has prevented the consummation of their union and this precipitates her decision to leave home, at first to become a nurse. She is actually in quest of satisfaction of her more or less imperfectly felt needs. From this point on she begins to develop into a sort of synthesis of the eternally feminine. She is a manifestation of the *Erdgeist,* the Cybel of *The Great God Brown,* mother, wife, mistress, prostitute, materialist, idealist: in short, the artist's conception of Woman. Into her life are woven strands from the lives of many men: of Gordon (a romantic

memory and an ideal); of the patient mother-ridden Charles Marsden; of Sam, her husband; of Edmund Darrell, her lover; and later of her son Gordon. For this woman no one man is enough. The marvelous creature, endowed with an inordinate thirst for life, assumes the proportions of a superwoman. With aspirations that can never quite be fulfilled, held in check by inhibitions, driven onward by appetites, she is the incarnation of vitality, a creature that is driven to meddle in the lives of others that her own life may be filled to overflowing. No one is a match for her; nothing arrests her progress, nothing but old age. At last she is overcome by time and by that very spirit of youth (in the person of her son) that urged her on to rebel when she was young. The young Gordon and the girl he is determined to marry leave her, even as she had left her helpless father.

This, essentially, is the "story" of *Strange Interlude.* There are several plot incidents, absorbing in themselves, but brought in only in order to throw the character of Nina into high relief. As I think back over the episodes of the play, I see in it no "moral," no "intention," indeed very little of any definite philosophy. This in spite of what O'Neill and some of his

spokesmen have said on the subject. It was O'Neill's aim to expose imaginatively a chain of events in which a few people exhibit to us their thoughts and motives over a long period of years. Life begins; it offers us problems, joys, tragedies; it seems to take shape occasionally as a thing of beauty, but oftener as a senseless and cruel joke; yet it is a fascinating process, a great adventure. The puppets we call ourselves are momentarily self-important with their little schemes for overcoming death and avoiding unhappiness, but toward the end they lose bit by bit their desires and the fierce impulses of youth, declining slowly into a sunset period in which peace alone seems worth having. Thus Nina seems to outgrow and cast off her sex, to embody and be identified with the life instinct, as she dominates each situation in order not to be dominated by it. Because she is conceived in the dramatist's mind as a woman, each situation in her life is symbolized by a man, possessing something that she needs, has needed, or will need at last. In the case of Marsden we see her carefully appraising him in the first act, marking him out for use at some future time; at the end of the ninth act, when everything else has gone, she falls into his protecting arms, there to pass peacefully the last days of her life.

This last situation reminded me of the end of *Faust*, but here Marsden is Gretchen and Nina Faust.

I have not yet touched on the essential element in *Strange Interlude*—the thing that makes it, with all its faults, a masterly creation. This is no more nor less than the dramatist's divination of the motives of his people. As I have said, he could easily have told his story in three acts, but he used nine in order that he might not have to say, "If I had had time, I might have told you everything essential about these people." He did have time, because he took it. The worst of it is he took a little too much time, not his own, but ours.

We are almost at once let into the secrets of these characters: they tell us a great deal of what they think and feel. Not everything, of course, for that would be impossible and not at all necessary, but enough for the purpose in hand. The thoughts expressed aloud cannot at best constitute more than a fraction of those half-thoughts, hints and shadowings that haunt the subconscious mind, but they are enough for O'Neill. Shakespeare did much the same thing, and so did Goethe. O'Neill has tried to go a little farther, and has used the device somewhat more realistically. If he had been a Shake-

speare or a Goethe he could have succeeded where they did, and with less ado. Simple and crude as it is, the device is occasionally very effective. Hence there is no surprise in the ordinary sense of the word: no suspense, and no curiosity of the sort aroused in conventional fiction. But I ask you, is there anything more surprising or more highly charged with the elements of suspense than a human being? Conrad knew this, and because Conrad knew a great deal about human beings he often told his plot in the first two or three pages. O'Neill knows that *Strange Interlude* is heavy with suspense, and for this reason he throws overboard most of the devices by which dramatists usually stimulate it. He never releases the tension in his pursuit of the mainsprings of human activity; this is his aim throughout. Like a surgeon he cuts deep, knowing always just what he is after, even though he sometimes leads us up blind alleys.

While he has succeeded in exhibiting a remarkable series of events, each of which throws into relief some quintessential characteristic of one or more persons; while he has conceived largely and written nobly, I feel that *Strange Interlude* is not the perfect work it might have been. For one thing, the shade of Strindberg

hovers too close over it all: there is something strained, a bit diagrammatic and intellectualized in the character of Nina. She is rather too special—too much the female of the species. If Nina is the inimical *Erdgeist*, she is at the same time the Earth Mother. Or rather, she ought to be. Woman, the beast of prey, is Strindberg's invention, and I don't think O'Neill's vision of the world is as narrow and warped as that of the Swedish poet.

Technically, what of the asides and the nine acts? Is it always necessary to express aloud what one thinks and feels? Cannot the actor occasionally show it? I believe that perhaps one-third of all the words not intended to be heard by the other characters might have been omitted without the loss of anything essential. O'Neill has overworked his device.

Finally, there is something lacking in the last three acts. They are somewhat repetitious, and could have been either omitted or condensed into one.

In these acts we notice again the dramatist's tendency to get lost in the mazes of his own rhetoric. In becoming familiar with the shape and color and words every writer has to guard against the temptation to create mere literature or what looks like it, for he too often becomes

the slave, as Stevenson and Wilde did, of the thing he conquers. Throughout *Strange Interlude,* particularly in the asides, there are irritating lapses into fine writing. Of course, I am not insisting that one's thoughts ought not to be well expressed, but good expression does not mean "fine" writing, and most of O'Neill's fine writing is not good expression. In his attempt to avoid the banalities of surface realism he falls into another sort of error.

He must have the courage to remain simple, and this is the more imperative if he is to continue storming the heights toward which his ambition is driving him. It is only when an artist reveals what is simple in its fundamental aspects that he can offer us some notion of the complexity of life.

"LAZARUS LAUGHED"

Alone of all the O'Neill plays completed since his apprentice days, *Lazarus Laughed* has not yet been professionally acted, nor has there been a single performance of any kind in New York City. Several managers have had the script but until recently only one has had the courage to tie it up. At the present moment

James Light has it and plans to put it on during the season of 1929-30.

However, in April, 1928, it was first produced under the direction of Gilmor Brown, at the Pasadena Community Playhouse.

Shortly after the MS. was finished (in 1926) O'Neill said to me he thought it was the "most successful thing I ever did. I think I've got it just right. It *is*, from my viewpoint. It's in seven scenes, and all the characters wear masks. And here I've used them right. In *Brown* I couldn't know beforehand how the scheme would work out. They were too realistic there, and sitting way back in the theater you couldn't be sure if the actors had on masks or not. I should have had them twice as large—and conventionalized them, so the audience could get the idea at once. In *Lazarus* I believe I've managed the problem of big crowds better than crowds are usually worked in plays. It's never quite right. My Jews all wear Jewish masks, and it's the same with the Greeks and Romans. I think I've suggested the presence and characteristics of mobs (by means of masks) without having to bring in a lot of supers. I also have a chorus of seven, who chant together, emphasizing and 'pointing' the action throughout. Then there are other new stunts. I've worked

out every single detail of the setting and action, even the lighting. Incidentally, I've done the same thing with all my plays, only [with a smile] I didn't get credit for it. I guess I ought to have that mentioned on the programs!"

I did not see Mr. Brown's production of *Lazarus*, but Ralph Adams, an actor and stage-manager of more than usual perspicacity and taste, wrote to me after the opening, which he had attended:

> "Brown accomplished things that the arty magazines have talked about for years, but which I have never seen successfully done before. I mean in the grouping and moving of his crowds, the opposition of group and group in mass and rhythmic movement, with individual figures working against them like sharp bits of detail against a textured fabric. He used two levels, one about seven feet above the other, arranged in blocks, with steps this way and that, pylons, screens and decorative accessories, differently set and lit for the different episodes. . . . Several of the pictures fairly knocked the breath out of me. . . . Pichel [who played Lazarus] was amazing. . . . But the play seemed verbose: the thing was too damned long."

From another source I heard that the element of pageantry was emphasized because O'Neill would not allow a line to be changed

or cut, and music and dancing were added to such an extent that the production "developed finally into an elaborate pageant with music as the predominant note."

O'Neill calls his work a "Play for an Imaginative Theater," but he might more appropriately have said an Imaginary Theater. There is so much in *Lazarus* that can only be blunted and vulgarized by taking it into the playhouse, that he ought to be content to leave it, as Hardy left *The Dynasts*, for production in the "theater of the mind."

Lazarus Laughed is first of all the exposition of a philosophy of life and death. Here we have to do more particularly with the idea than with the characters who work it out. *Lazarus* has risen from the tomb and after Jesus has gone away he began to laugh "softly like a man in love with God," walking abroad from that time on, preaching his doctrine that "Death is the fear between." The chorus chant

> Laugh! Laugh!
> There is only life!
> There is only laughter!
> Fear is no more!
> Death is dead!

Fortified by his faith, Lazarus fears nothing as he tests its validity by setting himself against

those who fear life in fearing death. He comes at last to convert the Emperor Tiberius. But the materialism of the Roman cannot prevail against the ecstatic Lazarus, and even though Tiberius has him killed, the prophet of eternal life is triumphant. At the end Caligula the scoffer, the degenerate heir of Tiberius, is almost won over to the new faith, and as the curtain falls he cries out "Fool! Madman! Forgive me, Lazarus!"

Lazarus Laughed is a hymn to life, a cry of triumph shouted in the faces of those Christians who look upon life as a vale of tears, the petty egotists who claim an everlasting happiness in heaven because they lack the courage to be happy on earth. O'Neill's conception of immortality, though not at all new, is a happy and courageous one. He resents the impudent insult to "life's nobility which gibbers 'I, this Jew, this Roman . . . must survive in my pettiness forever!'" Into the mouth of Lazarus, who carries in his breast a Will to Live not for his own sake but for all men, he has put words that express completely the essence of this positive and optimistic philosophy: "Believe! What if you are a man and men are despicable? Men are also unimportant! Men pass! Like rain into the sea! The sea re-

mains! Man remains! Man slowly arises from the past of the race of men that was his tomb of death! For Man death is not! Man, Son of God's Laughter, *is!*"

You will remember that at the end of *Desire Under the Elms* a man and a woman sit silently waiting to be taken off and sent to their punishment, yet there was no note of impending doom, only a moment of peace and serenity. For the first time the victims of fate in an O'Neill play had faced death not as the end of all, but as an unimportant incident: the beauty of the passion of Abbie and Eben transcended the "tragedy" of their crime and punishment. In *Marco Millions* the idealistic boy was turned into a hard-headed man of commerce who saw nothing of the beauty of Kukachin; yet her loveliness persisted, even after death. In *Strange Interlude* too there is a serenity that emerges not out of the denial of life but from a mighty affirmation of it, when Nina says to Charlie, "Yes, our lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!" Put otherwise: if the lives of men and women are little things only, there is at least something else, bigger and higher, that must transcend them.

Of the validity of O'Neill's philosophy in

Lazarus Laughed there is no need to speak at length. Personally, it appeals to me, and that is why the play that was written to propound it seems a little better in my eyes than it really is. But I object first of all to the dramatist's definitely abandoning the viewpoint of the artist and adopting that of the thinker and prophet; I object to the artist putting his talent at the disposal of the propagandist. Like most converts to a new idea, O'Neill is not content to state, he must reiterate and hammer away until the most dunderheaded listener sees what he is driving at. Half the choruses of *Lazarus* should be cut and nearly half of Lazarus' lines; there is little development in the play, which is consequently over-written, and in spots even bombastic. There is of course a somber beauty in the conception and there are passages of lyrical loveliness, but these are not enough.

I love the theater too much to want to see our best dramatist turn into a prophet, a philosopher, or a thinker, for I fear that no one can be these and remain a great artist. There is naturally no reason why O'Neill should not attempt to portray characters in the throes of mental and spiritual torture, but the moment he himself tries to solve the riddle of the universe he is lost. It is my opinion that in his impatience to widen the scope of the theater he has

too quickly passed from what he regards as the superficialities of Realism into the rarefied regions of the abstract.

If O'Neill were a genuinely original thinker or even a brilliant spokesman for the ideas of a brilliant thinker, we might argue as to whether we should be the losers if he were to give up writing plays altogether, but his ideas as contributions to contemporary thought are negligible; they are at best slightly varied forms of what we have all been reading during the past decade or so.

I demand of no artist directly to explain or expound life, so long as he portrays it with truth and passion. By these he is enabled to give us in terms different from the terms of the philosopher his own implicit judgment on the world and all that dwell therein. Leonardo painted his *Mona Lisa* and when he laid down the brush for the last time his job was done. He left it to others to elaborate upon its implications. What Pater wrote about the picture can never affect the picture itself.

"DYNAMO"

I now come to the latest of the plays. *Dynamo* was produced by the Theater Guild

in February, 1929. In an article that appeared shortly before the opening Kenneth Macgowan described its origin. One day a year or two ago O'Neill stood watching a dynamo at a plant near Ridgefield, Connecticut, where electricity is generated from the waters of New England rivers. There was something in the machine that suggested a new god, just as the stone images of the past symbolized the old gods. The great hydro-electric generator in the play "is huge and black, with something of a great massive ebony idol about it, the 'exciter' set on the main structure like a round head with oblong eyes above the squat torso."

That *Dynamo* should not be regarded entirely as an independent work is evident from Macgowan's words. "In essence," he writes, "it is a clearing ground for the erection of other structures." It may be, he continues, the "beginning of a bridge between emotional reality and lyric faith."

The dramatist himself wrote that the play is a

> "symbolical and factual biography of what is happening in a large section of the American (and not only American) soul right now. It is really the first play of a trilogy that will dig at the roots of the sickness of today as I feel it—the death of an

old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer. . . . The other two plays will be *Without Ending of Days* and *It Cannot Be Mad.*"

There is an ominous note in all this: O'Neill is certainly worrying too much about God and his own soul. I believe he is doing too much of his own private thinking aloud, playing an autobiographical *Strange Interlude* with long asides that ought to be ruthlessly cut. Perhaps he hasn't the patience to let his philosophy of life mature, but must out with it incontinently? If so, then he needs the most rigid sort of self-discipline.

To return to *Dynamo*. It is only the beginning, the first chapter, a fragment, and whatever judgment we pass on it must be modified by the two plays that are to follow. It is the tragedy of a young man who loses faith in the "old God of dogma, imagines that he recovers it in the sleek image of an electric dynamo and soon finds himself worshipping it with the

same Calvinistic vehemence, superstition and madness. Having violated the vow of chastity made in pious devotion to the new electric god, he casts himself into the dynamo in a graphic final scene." [19]

The story of Reuben Light and his rapid conversions from Fundamentalism to Atheism, and from Atheism to the worship of science, is told with remarkable skill and very few digressions. The first two acts are laid successively in each of four rooms of the adjacent homes of the Fundamentalist and the Atheist. We see into these houses that stand stripped of their walls, looking like skeletons of wooden framework, hideous and bare. The young man falls in love with Ada Fife of the Atheist family, and most of the action centers round the boy and the girl. The last act is laid inside the huge power plant—incidentally a remarkable piece of stage setting and directing.

Up to the last part of the final act, O'Neill carries through a straightforward plot, and then he evidently plants a situation as an emplacement for the next play. Though the text may clarify the point, I am not certain just why Reuben considers Ada a necessary obstacle in the way of his embracing a new religion, or why the dynamo so jealously prevents his union with

the girl. Without sufficient reason, it seems to me, Reuben shoots and kills Ada. Then he prays to the dynamo: "O Dynamo, God of Electricity, which gives life to all things, hear my prayer! Receive me into the Great Current of Your Eternal Life. Bless me with Your secret so that I can save men from sin and sorrow and death! Grant me the miracle of Your love." At the very end he "throws his arms over the head of the dynamo; his hands grasp the carbon brushes of the exciter. In a flash all the lights in the plant dim down until they are almost out and the noise of the dynamo dies until it is the faintest hum. Simultaneously his voice rises in a sobbing cry of pain . . . like that of a happy baby."

My guess is that a child will be born of the union of Reuben and Ada, and grown to man's estate, he too will seek a new religion, like the character of the Billionaire's Son in Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy.

Dynamo points to a sequel, but no matter what the next play is to be, the fact remains that *Dynamo* has been released to the public as one play alone. It can be looked upon in two entirely different ways, and I believe I can take both viewpoints. In intention it is Promethean, a challenge to our civilization, a daring

attempt to synthesize in the form of a modern morality play the most baffling intellectual problems of our time. Potentially, it is highly charged with poetry and the fire of youthful imagination. Judged as it must finally be as a work of art, it fails in that it remains at best little more than the skeleton of a magnificent effort, like the bare outlines of the two houses of the stage setting.

For O'Neill's effort to cast into drama form what he is evidently so determined to say, I have unbounded admiration, though I think that in doing so he is losing precious time and labor.

Dynamo (and this is the second way of looking at it) adds nothing to our knowledge of the religious problem. If it fails to do this, and if at the same time it fails, as it almost entirely does, to move us as a spectacle to be enjoyed in a theater, then O'Neill is clearly on the wrong track. We may honor him for his high aim, but we cannot trust his judgment or believe in the validity of his self-criticism. By and large, *Dynamo* is a failure.

Our final estimate of any play does not depend on the number of particular merits or demerits we charge to its account, and in the case of *Dynamo* it takes far more time to enumerate

the faults than the virtues; so I refuse to see in it, as some of our metropolitan critics do, a proof that O'Neill is lost to us as an artist. His power as a playwright is unimpaired.

THE FUTURE

I SHAN'T prophesy, I only wonder what he will do. On the threshold of his forty-first year, with fame and fortune beyond the measure of most writers, Eugene O'Neill is more splendidly eager in the pursuit of his ideals than he has ever been, and there seems no limit to his ambition.

Nearly three years ago he told me: "All the most dramatic episodes of my life I have so far kept out of my plays, and the majority of the things I have seen happen to other people. I've hardly begun to work up all this material, but I'm saving up a lot of it for one thing in particular, a cycle of plays I hope to do some day. There'll be nine separate plays, to be acted on nine successive nights; together they will form a sort of dramatic autobiography, something in the style of *War and Peace* or *Jean-Christophe*."

This must be the work he spoke of recently to George Nathan and Benjamin De Casseres as "the Big Grand Opus," which was to be neither a play nor a novel; "there will be many plays in it and it will have greater scope

than any novel I know of. Its form will be altogether its own—a lineal descendant of *Strange Interlude* in a way, but beside it *Interlude* will seem like a shallow episode."

He spoke of other projects, too, possibly a straight narrative telling about himself; there was also to be a play on the New Woman, written in the Elizabethan manner, though possibly that may have been a parenthetical remark about *Strange Interlude*.

"I intend," he said some years ago, "to use whatever I can make my own, to write about anything under the sun in any manner that fits or can be invented to fit the subject. And I shall never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it—or, better still, feel it? If so, shoot, and let the splinters fly wherever they may. If not, not. This sounds brave and bold—but it isn't. It simply means that I want to do what gives me pleasure and worth in my own eyes, and don't care to do what doesn't. . . . It is just life that interests me as a thing in itself. The why and wherefore I haven't attempted to touch on yet." [20]

Since that time he has indeed attempted to touch on the why and wherefore, but even now I don't think he has reached his full stature. He has written a good deal that is just as well

forgotten, he has given us plays that are inept, violent and verging on the pretentious; he has unmistakably set up his standard as a prophet; he has too often striven to write jewelled passages instead of stinging dialogue; he is, in short, a maker of plays that are good, bad, and indifferent. But so far he has never written a line that was deliberately insincere, nor has he once tried to capture the prizes of material success.

If I were concerned with his failures alone I would never have troubled to write this little book: it is because of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude* and *The Great God Brown*, of parts of *Diff'rent* and *'Ile*, of flashes seen for an instant in *Marco Millions* and *The Hairy Ape*, that I think it worth while to chronicle the development and progress of the man who did these things.

He is still among us, and it is hard to judge him dispassionately. As he pursues his way, he begins to take on the proportions of a prodigy, no longer a playwright humbly observing his fellow-men and tying them up in knots for the delight of theatergoers. He has cast his glance high above the heads of men and women in a heroic if perhaps futile effort to

encompass life in its outlines rather than in its episodes. He has become a passion incarnate, struggling to discover the best medium for the expression of his torments and exaltations. His achievements have never measured up to his aims, but then whose have? He has been told to come down from the skies and repeat again for us the little tricks he used to perform in his early years. He is destined to go on striving, failing, seeking; the quest alone is what matters to him.

Though I believe he is temporarily on the wrong track, I have faith that he will recover the spiritual and mental balance that has already produced his finest work, that with maturity he will perceive in simple forms and human beings whatever material he requires for the expression of everything that any artist need concern himself with, and that without the facile aids of violent actions and rhetorical word-spinning he can intensify his effects and exalt the spirit by his art. It is possible to write in a mood of serenity without releasing the cords of passion.

But even if Eugene O'Neill were never to write another line, it must be recorded that he has once or twice walked the heights.

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2. Same as Note 1.
3. *Journal of Outdoor Life*, 1923.
4. Feb. 26, 1926.
5. New York *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1924.
6. From this point on to page 82 is a condensed version of my article in the New York *Herald Tribune*, Feb. 10, 1929.
7. David Karsner's *Sixteen Authors to One*, New York, 1928.
8. Isaac Goldberg's *The Theater of George Jean Nathan*, New York, 1926.
9. Same as Note 8.
10. Same as Note 5.
11. *A Letter From O'Neill*, New York *Times*, April 11, 1920.
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13. *Eugene O'Neill*, by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. *The Freeman*, March 21, 1923.
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15. Same as Note 8.
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